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MEN NEVER KNOW
CAREER
A TALE FROM BALI
NANKING ROAD

VICKI BAUM

Central Stores

GEOFFREY BLES
37 ESSEX STREET, STRAND, LONDON

This translation into English of
"DER GROSSE AUSVERKAUF"
has been made by
PAUL SELVER

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CENTRAL STORES

All the characters in this novel are imaginary and no reference to any living person is intended

I

'GOOD heavens! There's that woman again,' thought Nina, and eyed the curious figure which at five minutes to six came in through the glass door separating the new premises from the old, and the Provision Department from the China Goods. It was a special fish day in the Provisions with everything marked down to twenty cents a pound. The whole floor reeked of it. This was the fourth time that the woman had made her appearance, and as on the previous occasions she had turned up just before closing-time. She was the kind of woman who always turns up too late. And although the five steps near the glass door were marked with an illuminated sign "Beware of the steps," she missed her footing when she reached them, dropped a parcel, and clutched unsteadily at her hand-bag. Her hat was rather askew and her face was flushed. She was one of those customers who are always on the search for something cheaper. Shop-soiled blouses, leaky coffee-pots, discoloured leather bags, clearance sales of imitation silk stockings—that is the sort of thing they go after. They are the wives of underpaid

clerks, those worried and fretful women who never get anything which is worth the price they pay for it.

This particular woman had been allured by that rose-pattern china set for twelve people. It was displayed on the second counter and consisted of dishes, plates, coffee-cups and the rest of it. The china was not absolutely white, but the roses were very pink and the leaves very green. The edges were gently scalloped and slightly gilded. The price marked on the ticket was $39·80. This price was, in itself, quite a work of art; there was a suggestion about it which made the set seem much cheaper than forty dollars. All the way from factory to department store the wages of hundreds of people had been cut, simply in order that this crockery set could be priced at twenty cents below forty dollars. And now, there it was, with all its roses and its second-rate glare, luring prospective purchasers.

The woman stopped in front of the crockery set, and while she was peering about for a saleswoman, she was plainly also taking counsel with herself and doing some mental arithmetic.

'Not me, for the love of Mike, not me!' thought Nina in alarm, and she did her best to look forbidding. 'For once in a way Miss Drivot could serve the last customer,' she reflected with a feeling of annoyance, and three little wrinkles showed themselves upon her pretty forehead.

Eric, her boy-friend, declared that when she was upset she looked like a young dachshund. He also declared that she was still too small to fit into her skin. She had, it may be added, a supple, clear and velvety skin, a skin such as a girl of nineteen ought to have. When Nina recalled these and similar remarks which her boy-friend had made, and which nobody else in the world could have thought of, she always felt a small but pleasant tingling sensation in the pit of her stomach. And she felt it even now, five minutes—no, two and a half minutes before closing-time, and with a tiresome customer close at hand.

"Are you disengaged, miss?" asked the woman in front of the china set, and Nina surrendered herself to her fate.

For it certainly was her fate to get saddled with all the tiresome customers. "I can't figure out why it always happens to me—they just swoop down on me like flies," she grumbled to her boy-friend Eric and her girl-friend Lilian.

"Is it any wonder they swoop down on you, honey?" said her boy-friend.

"Customers are enough to make anyone sick," said Lilian, and ignored Nina's plaintive appeal. "Yes, indeed," said Nina, but it did not sound as if she altogether meant it.

There she stood in her department of the store, with her glossy hazel-coloured hair and

solemn expectation in her glance. She looked so thoroughly nice and kind-hearted that, when buying a set of china or a cut-glass fruit-dish, a customer did not have to be a great judge of character, to prefer being served by her rather than by the crabbed and leathery Miss Drivot.

"Thirty-nine dollars?" asked the woman in front of the rose-pattern set of china. By this time it was one minute past six. The bell had already stopped ringing.

"Thirty-nine dollars eighty," said Nina politely, and with one of her knuckles she caused a cup to emit a clear tinkling sound. "It's the best quality china. A really first-class line."

"But it's so dear. Can't you—don't they make any reduction?"

"I'm afraid not, madam. It's hand-painted. A lovely piece of work."

"But I can't afford all that much. Hand-painted? That means that if anything gets broken, I shan't be able to replace it."

"Oh, yes, madam, that could be arranged," said Nina. This was now the fourth time that the matter had been discussed. The woman was hankering after the set, but she simply couldn't afford it. Four minutes past six. In spite of her annoyance and impatience Nina felt that she understood the woman's dilemma, and although she did not recognize it as such, what she really felt was sympathy.

"You see," the woman then proceeded to explain, "it's my silver wedding quite soon."

"No, really?" remarked Nina politely. She would have liked to add: "I'm getting married myself pretty soon," but, of course, while serving customers she ceased to have any private life. Five minutes past six by the clock above the glass door. The strains of the last gramophone in the adjoining musical department were now hushed. Eric was waiting. As might have been expected, Miss Drivot had cleared off. The only place where they were still busy was the despatch-room at the back of desk twenty-four. There Mrs. Bradley was tying up parcels with the mechanical regularity of a machine. Mrs. Bradley was another of the unlucky ones who were always kept until the very last.

"If I were you, madam, I'd take it," said Nina. "It's a real bargain."

Mr. Berg, the senior floor-walker, was just making a final trek through his department. Without being aware of it, Nina gazed towards him with a mixture of respect and entreaty. Mr. Berg inspired in her the same kind of veneration which a budding author might feel for a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Mr. Berg was a man with a heart, there could be no mistake about that. His department all agreed on that point; he was a man with a heart and also with guts. He now came to her rescue.

"The lift has stopped working for the day, madam," he said by way of a polite hint. "We close at six. When you have completed your purchase, madam, I am afraid that you will have to use the staircase."

"I can't make up my mind to-day," said the lady. "I'll come back another time," she added and shambled off.

Nina was left with the job of tidying up, and she was so nervous that the cups and saucers rattled as she picked them up. Eric was downstairs at Staircase 5. And now the staff-lift had also stopped for the day. She would have to hurry along to Staircase 8 and then down into the long corridor in the basement where the lockers stood, each one narrow and upright, like soldiers on parade. Nina took just a hasty peep at herself in the cloak-room mirror, rinsed her hands, dabbed a whiff of powder over her face and drew a streak of red across her lips.

"Say, you're in a tearing hurry again," said Lilian, who sat close by, manicuring her nails and marking the line of her eyebrows in a leisurely manner.

"I am that," said Nina, with one arm already in the sleeve of her cloak. "Has Mrs. Bradley gone yet?"

"Haven't seen her," replied Lilian and went on carefully painting her lips.

"Well, I can't wait a second longer," said Nina and dashed out again.

"Here, wait for me, I'm coming right now," shouted Lilian after her; but the three little wrinkles again showed themselves upon Nina's forehead, and as she was now outside, she pretended not to have heard. She didn't want to have Lilian following her around night after night, even though she *was* her girl-friend. There were times when Lilian indulged in wisecracks with Eric which Nina, however much she tried, could not regard as funny.

She scampered through the passages in the basement and pushed her way forward among the mob of girls. In the yard belonging to the old premises was the place where they had to clock out, and at this point the tide was stemmed. As always, there was a draught in the passage, which blew a liberal helping of dust into everybody's eyes and made them water. By the time she reached Staircase 5, Nina could not see properly, but Eric was there all right, looking quite the gentleman, with a silk scarf and a derby hat. Recently, too, he had been making efforts to grow a moustache. Nina could feel the warmth of his arm as he caught hold of her.

"Hallo, *lille Spurv*," he said, and off they went. This was Danish and meant "little sparrow." Eric was a Dane and his name was Bengtson. He had come to America while still a boy, and sometimes he recalled the birch-woods and shallow inlets of his native land. In many ways he was

different from the kind of young man whom girls like Nina generally made friends with. She continued to look upon him as a foreigner who had arrived in America by the latest steamer, and did not realize what an important place New York was. He was much too tall for Nina, and his face had a flippant look which suggested that everything which he saw was causing him vast amusement.

Nina squeezed his arm a little tighter beneath her elbow. She said nothing, for there were simply no words to express how happy she felt whenever she and Eric were arm-in-arm, with her forehead reaching to his shoulder. She kept in step with him as best she could, and turned her face upwards to him.

It was the evening face of so many city girls, a small, young face, and the delicate texture of the skin showed that she did not get enough air and sun. It was a face which was very young and very winsome, slightly wayward and slightly distrustful. It was the face of someone who, however tired she might be, would never admit that she was tired. There was a trace of shadow under the eyes and the harsh light of the arc-lamps and illuminated advertisements swamped the surface of the cheeks and the open mouth.

"Bit late, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes, right at the very last minute another one of those silly old tabbies came along."

"Never mind, we can be at Rivoldi's in another ten minutes," he said, and began to take longer strides.

But there was no getting along. It was the hour at which every city is turned into a mad welter of people streaming out of all the shops, chasing after cars, filling the subway and the trams; cars rolling up, policemen's white gloves, beggars, women selling flowers and trying to get rid of their last few bunches, street vendors pushing their fruit-barrows home, men trying to pick up a girl for the evening, girls trying to pick up a man for the evening, married men rushing home, married men dawdling about and reluctant to go home, men standing by themselves at the street-corners and staring at the couples.

"Rivoldi's? Aren't we going home?" said Nina, and let her face sink quickly into the shadow.

"Home? Not a chance. I'll be lucky if I finish my job by six to-morrow morning."

"Overtime? What sort of a job is it?" asked Nina.

"Laying eggs. I've got to go on laying eggs all night," said Eric with a certain dignity. He opened the door of the little Italian restaurant. The interior smelt of onions and cheap cigarettes, and the air was blue. Eric had a weakness for this smoky den. He had been to Italy once—at that time he had still hoped to make his name as a painter—and he could speak Italian.

"Laying eggs? What for?" asked Nina, laughing.

"For Easter window-dressing," said Eric and thrust himself into a corner. She squeezed herself behind the small marble-topped table and gazed at him delightedly.

"Give me a cigarette," she said, so as not to let her delight appear too obvious. "And leave my knees alone," she added. "Don't start any monkey tricks here." For Eric, crazy fellow that he was, did not always behave. Everybody agreed that Eric was a crazy fellow. "Ravioli, coffee, apricot tart," he said to the waiter. "Me too," said Nina, who had not understood a word. Eric had taken out a pencil and was sketching on the table among the wet circles left there by previous coffee-cups.

"What's that supposed to be?" asked Nina, inhaling her first puff of cigarette-smoke. Eric looked up for a moment as the smoke reappeared from her tiny nostrils, which she had inflated to their utmost extent. He was enormously fond of her.

"Make some smoke-rings," he said in a tone of command. Nina inhaled smoke and made smoke-rings. Eric viewed this with approval as if it were an entertaining theatrical performance, and then went on sketching. "I have an idea," he then remarked in an absent-minded kind of way.

"About the eggs?"

"Yes, for the Easter window-dressing."

"It'll be just too bad if you're going to make a bee-line back to the office because of that every evening. Did the boss send for you?"

"Yes, the old hippopotamus. All he can think of is an Easter rabbit and a birch-tree in each window, all along the block."

"And what about you?"

"Me? It won't take me long to think up something smarter than that."

"I should think not, indeed," said Nina in a satisfied tone. Since she had known this fellow Eric, she had realized for the first time what a genius was. A genius in window-dressing and all sorts of things. Publicity and drawings and air-balloons, in fact an all-round genius. But although her experience of a genius was still quite recent, she had already discovered that life with a genius was not always an easy matter.

"So I shall be at home all by myself again. And I'd looked forward such a lot to being with you," she said shyly.

"Slip into your nest and get some sleep, *lille Spurv*," he said; "you look pretty well all in. I'll be as quick as I can. Perhaps I'll pop round early to-morrow morning to say how-do before you go to business."

"A fine marriage ours is going to be," she said. "When I come home from business, you have

to go, and when you come home, I have to go."

"It's going to be a swell marriage, you bet your life," he said, and at last stopped scrawling on the table. Nina watched him as he ate his ravioli. Once more he looked as if he were not sitting beside her at one of Rivoldi's dingy marble-topped tables, but somewhere far, far away.

"You're not tired, are you?" she asked.

"I should say not," was his answer. Nina drank her coffee and ate her cake. She felt disappointed and depressed. The evening without Eric lay before her like a dull and endless expanse of desert. "Of course I might go to the movies," she said doubtfully.

"No, you won't," declared Eric. "We go to the movies together. I won't have you seeing all the good films without me."

"Selfish brute," said Nina.

"That's so, where you're concerned," agreed Eric. It was all in fun.

"When are we going to the movies together?" asked Nina, half placated.

"To-morrow," he replied. He called the waiter and rattled off something in Italian. The bill was produced and Eric paid. The table-top was covered with scribble, but Nina could not make out what it was supposed to be. The waiter now fetched a damp rag and wiped it all away again.

"Come along, baby. I must be getting back," said Eric and thrust his arm in hers. Outside she faced up to the spring-time gust which swept round the corner. Now at last she realized how tired she was. She began to look forward to her bed. She drifted along towards the nearest subway station. Eric clutched her by the elbow before she could cross the street. "Look here," he said, "let's take a taxi. I'll give you a thaler to pay for it, and you can drive home." He said "thaler," and that made it sound very foreign and Danish.

"Why, you must be crazy. And then you talk about wanting to get married."

"Let's go. Stop at the Central Stores. After that the lady's driving on," he said, and pushed her into the taxi which he had fetched.

It takes a taxi a minute and a half to go from Rivoldi's to the Central Stores, and that includes two stops at the traffic lights. For the whole minute and a half Eric's mouth rested on hers.

"Good night, *lille Spurv*," he said as he got out. "There's your dollar."

"Remember me to the Easter rabbits," she said, "and see that you lay plenty of eggs."

At the next corner she stopped the taxi, paid the driver thirty cents, put the dollar, which had become quite warm in her hand, into her bag, and then the ravine of the subway engulfed her.

II

THE Central Stores extend along a whole block in the middle of the city, and each of the four frontages comprises twelve huge shop-windows. There are twelve storeys, each one crammed with goods and hustle. The central part consists of a skyscraper of eighteen storeys in which the offices and administrative sections are located.

As Eric approached the premises from the east wing, all the windows were lit up. In Windows 1 to 6 of the northern frontage the blinds were drawn and, behind them, shadows were moving about, for during the night the window-dressing would have to be finished there. It was ten to seven by the huge illuminated clock belonging to the central premises.

"Hallo, Joe," he said, as he went past the night-watchman's cubby-hole which was in the staff entrance. "Night-work, Mr. Bengtson?" asked Joe and stepped into the passage. He had a glass eye. After the war Mr. Crosby, the invisible god who held sway over the stores, had taken it into his head that he would give jobs to fifty disabled ex-Service-men. There had been a lot about this in

the papers, which described Mr. Crosby as a man who was conscious of his patriotic duty. Seven or eight of these veterans had kept their jobs, and they could be seen shuffling about here and there, inside the building. A one-armed negro worked the staff-lift in the north wing, and an apoplectic Irishman with an artificial leg was responsible for sharpening all the lead pencils in the offices.

"Easter window-dressing," said Bengtson—pushed his packet of cigarettes towards the watchmen and waited while he took one. "Don't mind if I do," said Joe and shoved the cigarette into his breast pocket. "Has the Old Boy turned up yet?" Bengtson then asked. "I haven't set eyes on Mr. Sprague," replied Joe. Bengtson began to whistle as he strode off. And he rattled his keys like castanets as he made his way to the lift. The empty sales-rooms were dimly lit, white wrappings had been spread over the goods which were on show. Lay figures in gorgeous attire and with a smile on their rigid faces stood here and there. Bengtson patted one of them on its waxen cheek. He was in a good temper. His blood was still tingling from Nina's kiss. He liked the look of the department store at night. 'The world's abundance,' he reflected casually. The thought came to him in Danish.

He opened the lift with his key, and was about to start moving upwards when Push arrived and

joined him. Push, the apprentice in the designers' studio, was a hobbledehoy of eighteen. Nobody knew how he had come by this nickname. He was carrying a huge pile of chintz bundles and was staggering beneath the load. "Mr. Sprague wants to see the colours," he panted, as the lift carried them up. Eric whistled a little louder. He was firmly convinced that Mr. Sprague, the Old Man, the boss of the window-dressing department, had been born colour-blind. Whistling, he pointed to some light-green chintz, stopped whistling, said, "We'll take that," and went on whistling. They then reached the twelfth storey, where the studio was located.

"Say, is it true that you dye your hair, Push?" he asked before they got out of the lift.

"No. Why?" stammered the apprentice. His projecting ears flushed a deep red. His hair was as blond as Jean Harlow's before the censors raised a protest. He was still standing there with his bundles of chintz and his crimson ears when Bengtson opened the door of the studio.

Just as Bengtson was about to walk in, he caught sight of someone coming out of the office of Philipp, the house-detective. "Hal*lo*," he said and let go of the door-handle. The girl coming towards him was Lilian, Nina's friend.

"Hallo, Lilian," he added.

Lilian had her cloak under her arm and she was buttoning up her frock. "Hallo, Bengtson," she

said in her rather husky voice. "Let's have a cigarette, quick!"

He promptly offered her his packet and at once struck a match. With raised eyebrows she took note of this small act of courtesy.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Why?" she retorted. "Do I look as if old man Philipp had been raping me? You can set your mind at rest. There's nothing the matter."

"I'd be sorry if that happened—I mean for old man Philipp," said Bengtson impudently. Lilian was standing in front of him. She had now finished buttoning up her frock, but her hands were trembling. She puffed away fiercely at her cigarette. Her way of smoking is quite different from Nina's, thought Eric. "I expected you'd have gone long ago," he said, merely for the sake of saying something. He couldn't stand Lilian. She always turned up when she wasn't wanted. Now she stood close in front of him and looked at him with a mocking smile.

"I never knew that Nina had a lipstick," she said. Push, the apprentice, had meanwhile come in and joined them. "How do you mean, Nina?" asked Eric uneasily. Lilian laughed and turned to go. "Her lips are always pale and she's sore with me for putting on what she thinks is too much make-up," she said. "I don't know what you mean," said Eric and felt rather foolish. Push smirked and rubbed his hand across his face.

Eric quickly took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. Crestfallen he hastily wiped away Nina's parting kiss.

"Well, good night," said Lilian. "I must be off."

"Who's waiting for you?" asked Eric.

"Vanderbilt," said Lilian, and went.

Eric watched her as she walked off. She had the most attractive hips in the whole store. "I'll show you down. There's nobody to work the lift as late as this," he shouted after her. He had the keys to all the doors because he often had to work at night.

"Once a gentleman, always a gentleman," said Lilian as he opened the door of the lift for her. She had a way of getting on his nerves, very much like a mosquito that manages to elude capture. The lift was at once filled with her cheap, crude scent. "Do you know what I'd like to do now?" she said, just before the lift stopped. "I'd like to go places and do things with you," she said, as he looked at her. "Whoopee in a big way, that's what I want."

"Why, you're crying," he said, slightly alarmed as he looked at her eyes.

"That's only something in my eye," she said. "Well, thanks for seeing me down."

Her scent was still noticeable when Bengtson arrived upstairs again and came out of the lift.

Mr. Sprague, the Old Boy, looked annoyed

when Eric entered. "When you've finished fooling around with the girls, perhaps we can pay a little attention to the windows," he rapped out. Bengtson merely laughed. Mr. Sprague looked like Mark Twain, old-fashioned and handsome, and he was proud of it. He had a brain of clay and a heart of gold.

"One of the mannequins was piping her eye, so I took her down in the lift," said Eric, off-hand.

"What a squire of dames you are!" remarked Mr. Sprague enviously. "Searching girls is no joke."

"What's that?" asked Bengtson. "How do you mean, searching girls?"

"Haven't you heard? There's been a case of theft and Philipp has had to search a good many of the girls."

"There's been quite a lot of thefts lately, don't you think, Mr. Sprague?" said Bengtson and toyed with the chintz. The light made the cheap material look very glossy.

"That's just what Mr. Crosby said: there's been quite a lot of thefts lately. But this last one is going to cost old man Philipp his job."

"What's happened?" asked Eric and stopped toying with the chintz.

"Well, you remember that in the art department there's a special display of rare Russian exhibits lent by private owners."

Bengtson remembered very well. He had

fought a pitched battle with the Old Boy about their arrangement, and in the end he had gained the day. The Old Boy had wanted to produce something garish and grotesque, in the manner of the Russian ballet. Eric had asked for some furniture from the antique department with which he had arranged a few rooms in empire style, and he had used them as a setting for the Russian exhibits. "What's been nicked?" he asked, more to please the Old Boy than because he was interested.

"A small icon, inlaid with jewels. It's worth two thousand dollars."

"Insured?" asked Bengtson. "Well, there you are, then. Nobody'll be a loser."

Suddenly he remembered Lilian's reddened eyes which, although free from tears, showed that she had been crying, and he felt a twinge of exasperation. "It beats me why anyone should think that the girls in the fashion department are likely to do anything of that kind. Old man Philipp must be getting half-witted."

The Old Boy chuckled to himself. "That'll happen to all of us when we've been here long enough," he said, "but you don't realize it yet, you young rascal."

Bengtson's exasperation now came to a head. He pictured to himself old man Philipp searching Lilian. "I'd knock the block off anybody who tried to search Nina," he burst forth.

"Who's Nina?" asked the Old Boy.

"We want to get married on Easter Sunday—I told you about it before," said Eric.

The Old Boy chuckled again. "It's about time you were chained up," he said with a mixture of admiration and envy.

Suddenly Eric dropped his private affairs and turned his attention to the chintz. Push was still standing by the long drawing-table on which he had laid out the material, and he was fingering the edge of it. He had an almost feminine predilection for colours, silks and glossy fabrics, and in his heart of hearts he was ashamed of it.

"You go home to bed, Push," said Bengtson, "we've got no use for children here."

The Old Boy now came up to the table and inspected the chintz through his glasses.

"We need thirty-six yards for each window," said Eric in a business-like voice, and handed Mr. Sprague a slip of paper containing figures and notes. "You want to select the green chintz, but I'm in favour of the yellow."

The Old Boy scrutinized the two colours which Bengtson held beneath his glasses.

"You're no judge of that, young man," he said. "We'll use the green."

Bengtson put on an offended air, but in reality he was delighted. "Then I'll go down right now and we can make a start with Window 7," was all he said, and he grabbed at the green chintz.

His method of making the Old Boy do exactly what he himself wanted nearly always worked.

"You'll make a start with Window 1, just as I said," ordered the Old Boy sternly.

Bengtson's face assumed an expression of injured innocence. "Thy will be done," he said, took the chintz and departed.

There were still traces of Lilian's scent in the lift.

III

LILIAN SMITH was employed in the French salon attached to the Fashion Department. Her name was Smith because she was the daughter of a navvy named Smith, and her name was Lilian because she was anxious to counterbalance the lowliness of her origin and her name. She had a vague idea of seeing her name one day on hoardings: Lilian Smith, the film actress; Lilian Smith, the revue star; Lilian Smith, the beauty queen. She would then stick to the Lilian and drop the Smith altogether. She hated everything connected with lower-class life: she hated the kitchen smell, the basement flat from the windows of which only the legs of the passers-by could be seen, the cockroaches that scuttled at night across the floorboards, the crack in her mirror with its flawed glass; she hated her bed, her frock, her parents, her hands, which had worked too hard ever to become a lady's hands. Lilian hated the customers, too, with a lasting hatred. She hated the wealthy women who drove up in their cars, with cheque-books in their bags, or with husbands who paid for what they bought. She smiled across her

shoulder at them with the routine smile of a mannequin, but she utterly hated them.

She had spent her childhood in the slums, and she had played hide-and-seek in the large gas-pipes which came into view when the worst of the houses there were pulled down. She had been an apprentice, first in a stuffy little tailor's shop, then at a bigger shop in Union Square, and finally at the Central Stores. She had been full of ambition when attending the classes at which the saleswomen of the Stores were trained. She had passed from Haberdashery to Lingerie, and then she had worked herself upwards and pushed her way forwards until she reached the genteel precincts of the Fashions, where everything was muffled—the lights, the voices, the colours. Lilian loved, too, the thick carpets into which her feet sank when she walked over them. There were thick grey-pink carpets, grey-pink walls, lamps which from chromium, bowl-shaped fixtures cast their light towards the ceiling. Madame Chalon, the French *directrice*, held sway over these domains. She was a creature of whims and moods, and in her sentimental moments she would tell the saleswomen all about her unhappy love for a famous dress-designer in Paris. Lilian put up with a good deal from Madame Chalon, for she was anxious to make her way onwards and upwards. For the last two months she had been allowed not only to sell frocks, but also, now and

then, to display them. She was at the transition stage leading from the sixteen-dollar scale of pay to the mannequins who occupied a higher rank and received higher wages.

She would enter the salon, clad in an ermine cloak or an evening frock—the copy of a Patou model—or in a midnight-blue silk dressing-gown. She looked at herself in the mirror, walked towards herself, stood still, turned round as she had been trained to do, spread the frock out around her and gazed over her shoulder at the customers—the customers whom she hated.

Lilian had, in the language of her occupation, a perfect Fourteen-figure. In other words, she was made like a queen, tall and slender, with delicate joints and long, smooth hips. Everything about her was small, and set as high as possible—knees, thighs and breasts. This daughter of Smith, the navvy, had an appearance which suggested that a breeder, after many efforts, had managed to produce the finest type of womanhood. She had a lovely body; she had a face, too, but no one looked at her face; everyone looked at her figure and at the clothes which arrayed this figure. Her face was not so beautiful as her body; it revealed too much hardness, and round the mouth and the chin there were signs of the Smith in her nature, the low origins and the high aspirations.

She adored the clothes which she put on, all the silks, chiffons, velours and lace fabrics: furs drove

her crazy. Her skin loved the touch of delicate material. Not long ago Eric had called her "a cold vamp." But there was passion in her, and sometimes its glow became unbearable. The worst of it all was that afterwards she had to take off the luxurious clothes and slip into her own trumpery twelve-dollar frock.

Like every good mannequin she was allowed one and a half to two minutes for changing her dress. Then she glided slowly and majestically to and fro in front of the customers; outside, in the changing-cubicle, her hands trembled when she stood between the three mirrors, slipped frocks off, put frocks on, quickly, quickly, with the short-tempered *directrice* at her back, fussing about and grumbling. The worst part of the whole business was to see those same frocks, those beloved frocks, being worn by the customers: to see how the effect of a model was spoilt, how all those women who were too short, too fat, too big, too old, squeezed themselves into the frocks, how they stood in front of the mirror, finding fault, how they showed themselves quite incapable of wearing the frocks and made the loveliest furs look vulgar—such were the things that had aroused Lilian's hatred.

"Yes, if I had her figure," the customers often said when Lilian displayed herself to them.

Yes, if you had my figure, Lilian would then think to herself haughtily. Well, and what if you did have my figure, she would continue her reflec-

tions, what then? With my figure you could earn sixteen dollars and live in a basement. With my figure there isn't even any chance of finding a boy-friend; most of the men aren't good enough, and the kind of man who might be good enough doesn't usually blow into the Central Stores.

"The belt's too tight," said Mrs. Thorpe and interrupted Lilian's stray reflections. Mrs. Thorpe was a woman whom her friends described as buxom. There she stood in the fitting-cubicle, squeezed into an evening frock, and in the mirror she looked more attractive than she did in reality. The mirrors in the fashion salon flattered them all a little. In the process of cutting, the glass had been tampered with just a trifle, so as to make all the ladies look slimmer than they really were. In the ready-made dress department, no such device had been used, and it teemed with forty-inch figures who were quite satisfied with themselves as God had created them. And when they had finished their shopping, up they trotted into the refreshment-room and battened on sandwiches, followed by apple-tart and whipped cream.

"The belt's too tight," said Mrs. Thorpe. "The belts here are always too tight. I have a French figure. In Paris all the frocks fit me."

Lilian hated Mrs. Thorpe more than all the other women. She was one of those women who came along because they were bored. For hours at a time she would have frocks demonstrated to

her, for hours at a time she would try frocks on, and her behaviour was nervous, erratic and fretful. In front of the mirror she showed signs of the dismay experienced by a woman approaching forty who sees a girl of twenty displaying her perfectly shaped body. Sometimes the stuffy atmosphere in the cubicle became very tense. Lilian envied the customer her money. The customer envied Lilian her beauty. The mutual smiles were redolent of envy, the atmosphere smelt of scent and female bodies—at any moment the outbreak of a storm might be expected. But in the end Mrs. Thorpe bought the black evening cloak with the real ermine trimmings, the Margot model.

"That old cow was worrying the life out of me again to-day, right up to the very last moment," said Lilian to Mrs. Bradley, while they were travelling home in the subway. They went together as far as 42nd Street, where Mrs. Bradley had to change. They were clinging to the same strap and dangled to and fro with the jolting of the train. It was dreadfully crowded: there wasn't the slightest chance of a seat.

"I only wish the Easter sale was over," said Mrs. Bradley.

"You're not the only one. What sort of a time do you think *we're* going to have?" said Lilian.

"You're still young," said Mrs. Bradley. Her face was pale and covered with freckles.

"I'd like to know when I shall find time to get

my hair fixed," said Lilian after a while. This was the problem which continually worried all these girls. They had to look smart, but the beauty parlours were shut in their faces at the very moment when their free time began.

"Well, I must change here," said Mrs. Bradley and began to elbow her way towards the carriage exit.

"It was swell of you to wait for me," said Lilian wearily.

"I wanted to know what happened. If you ask me, you oughtn't to have stood for being searched like that," added Mrs. Bradley, and got out. With a deafening din the train hurtled on.

A man clutched at the strap next to where Lilian was holding it. He was one of the hundred or so men who had tried and would still try to scrape acquaintance with Lilian. He puffed his warm breath on to her neck and pressed his knee against hers as if he could not help it, because they were crowded so tightly together. As Lilian clung to the strap, her cheap cloak caused her a feeling of discomfort which was almost like a bodily ache. She became painfully aware that its cheap lining was ragged. The part that was staring her in the face had begun to get shiny and the seams were going threadbare. Cheap things always go threadbare in the seams. She felt exasperated. She had worked hard all day long. Then she was kept for nearly an hour

beyond her time, and she had been prodded and searched as if she were a thief. 'One of these days I'll make you pay for that,' she thought desperately. She felt defenceless and insulted, and an evil power stirred within her.

"Lay off, will you, or I'll raise Cain," she muttered to the man. She was hankering after the evening cloak that Mrs. Thorpe had bought, and it made her feel quite ill. 'Just you wait,' she thought, as she travelled beneath the city, a weary human being among thousands of other weary human beings. 'Just you wait. Just you wait.'

The train stopped at 125th Street, and she got out listlessly. She had to walk three blocks before she reached 22nd Street where her parents lived. It was a district which abounded in Mexicans and Italians. She did not know what had induced them to go there. She only knew that she was a misfit there, and that one day, soon, very soon, she would have to clear out. There was a queue in front of a cinema with an illuminated inscription in Spanish. An electric piano was blaring from a bar-room. Children and dogs were playing in the street, and the gutter was full of garbage. Men in shirt-sleeves and large, blowsy women were squatting in front of the houses although the early spring evening was quite chilly.

"All by yourself, lady?" said a man behind her. She did not need to turn round, for she knew quite

well what he looked like. Swarthy, with narrow trousers and the garlic smell of the Mexican. She quickened her pace. He followed her.

"Shall I call a cop?" she said, half to herself and without turning round. "Have a heart, lady, have a heart," was the doleful reply. The footsteps began to lag. She reached the house where she lived, and lingered a moment before she went down the three steps to the front door. By now she was certain that she could not stand living there much longer.

At this moment, while she was still outside, she suddenly and unexpectedly saw Bengtson in her mind's eye. She had not thought of him—he had not entered her head. She was not in love with him—she was quite incapable of falling in love. In fact, she did not even like him. He was crazy, impudent, conceited and scatter-brained. A man would have to be very, very different from that before she could like him. First of all, he would have to be rich, with a good car, with first-rate suits and money and everything that goes with it. Someone accustomed to eating caviare, she pondered moodily.

A tabby cat came along and began to rub itself against her feet. Lilian did not bend down towards it, but stood stiffly at the front door and fixed her eyes upon the light of the street-lamp outside the house. He had lit her cigarette for her. He had shown her down in the lift. His

appearance and behaviour were different from those of the men whom she knew. 'Too bad that he's got no money,' she thought. 'Too bad that he's going to marry Nina.' She couldn't imagine why he was doing it. 'Too bad that I didn't really steal something,' she suddenly thought. It was a burning and corrosive thought which immediately faded away. Lilian clenched her teeth and opened the front door.

IV

LILIAN came from below and was struggling to get to the top; and as a mannequin in the fashion department she had already made considerable headway. Mrs. Bradley, on the contrary, came from the top and was slipping irretrievably downwards. A woman of forty-six whose job it is to tie up parcels in the despatch-room of a department store has obviously no further prospect in life, but tying up parcels was all that Mrs. Bradley had learnt to do after her husband, a manufacturer, had shot himself during the depression and left her with nothing but debts, muddle and disaster. Through influence and wire-pulling Mrs. Bradley had at last managed to get the job in the despatch-room, and she was constantly shuddering at the idea that she might lose even that.

She now stood in the despatch-room among the girls of sixteen who were beginning there at the bottom, and she was tying up parcels, hundreds and thousands of parcels, each one in exactly the same manner. When she looked up, she saw nothing but the hands which passed her the despatch-checks. Hands and labels, hands and

labels. She stood in a place where everybody was short-tempered and impatient, and nobody liked being kept waiting. She went on and on, tying up parcels; sometimes she thought about Skimpy and wondered whether Skimpy would get run over, or fall out of the window, or carry the benzine too close to the gas-ring. Skimpy was a little woman of eight years who acted as housekeeper while Mrs. Bradley was working.

They still had the little house at Fieldston which was a relic of the days when they were well-off. It was a spectre of a house which reminded them of better times. The rooms were too large, too numerous, too full and too expensive. Mrs. Bradley had done all she could to sell the house, but apparently nobody wanted it. Now she had fallen back upon letting rooms, single rooms at cheap rents to respectable people. At any rate, that covered her expenses.

In the cafeteria of the department store there was a notice-board on which the advertisements of the employees were displayed. "Piano wanted for sale," or "Would buy bicycle in good condition," or "Would join Sunday trips, exes shared." The notice-board was in that very conspicuous place where the employees in long queues had to push their way along until they reached the food counter. Particulars of one or several of Mrs. Bradley's rooms were always announced on this notice-board.

It was through this notice-board, too, that Nina had found a room when she had reached New York from Texas; like a grain of dust she had drifted, young and helpless, into the city, where she had no relatives whatever. It was through this notice-board that she had found a room next to Eric Bengtson, who had been lodging there for three months before her arrival, and who whistled, sang and altogether made a dreadful row in his room at night. And but for this notice-board Nina would probably never have ended up by marrying this crazy Eric, the window-dressing genius.

Their wedding on Easter Sunday was a swell affair, a wow, a knock-out. Nina said so, and Lilian, her bridesmaid, agreed.

After a struggle Eric had managed to get the Saturday off, and he spent his time preparing hearth and home. He shifted his bed into Nina's room, which was thus transformed back again into one of the Bradley double bedrooms, furnished in polished mahogany. He thereupon began to perform conjuring tricks in his own room, which was now to be their sitting-room. He set about the job as if it were a window-dressing competition. He painted the walls and decorated them with pictures of palms and climbing plants and tiny monkeys swinging to and fro upon them. He sawed away the carvings from the furniture and dragged along an indiarubber plant in a Chinese flower-pot. He dyed cushion

covers, nailed strips of fabric on to boxes, and did many other puzzling things. He slaved away in his paint-stained smock, and the whole time he made such an appalling noise, whistling and singing, that Skimpy could not learn her lessons. But the end of it was that he really produced something which looked quite like a swagger studio. When at last Nina reached home she was stiff all over with fatigue. "Boy, am I stiff!" she said, and first of all he had to loosen her up again in his own particular manner. She had wanted to get away promptly, as the china department was not much affected by the Easter trade which caused more of a stir in the ready-made dresses and the haberdashery. But as usual, a customer had turned up at three minutes to six and fastened on to Nina. This time it was a young man in a great hurry, a college boy or something of that sort, and he was in a terrible dither. He wanted—just imagine!—two champagne glasses and nothing else. Nina couldn't help laughing. She pictured to herself the whole lay-out in which these two champagne glasses were to figure. She regarded it as a sign of good luck. "Hope you have a swell time," she had said to the young man when he departed. "Thanks, same to you," he had replied. That was bound to bring good luck. It wasn't often that customers and saleswomen exchanged such cheery remarks.

That night Lilian helped her to turn out a bridal dress of sorts. Eric looked on and made some coffee, while Mrs. Bradley was kneading dough, during which process she kept falling asleep. Skimpy had been put to bed, but she was so excited that she talked in her sleep the whole time. Lilian made herself useful by transporting Eric's suits from his room into the wall-cupboard in the future bedroom. The sight of them, all neatly pressed, hanging side by side with her modest trousseau, made Nina realize to the full that she was getting married the next day. She was so tired out and excited that everything seemed like a dream viewed through misty greenish panes of glass. It was two o'clock in the morning when she lugged in a buffalo-hide trunk. "I can store my things away in the cellar," she said. Mrs. Bradley woke up and nodded. "What treasures have you got there?" asked Eric. "We need a drink," declared Lilian. "Those are my things," said Nina, a little embarrassed. "Old keepsakes and such-like."

Eric took the trunk from her and carried it into the cellar. Down there it smelt of hot-water pipes and dust, and large spiders were swinging to and fro among the cobwebs. Eric took Nina in his arms and kissed her. She stayed like that for a moment, muffled in his embrace; it was warm and cosy, and she would have liked to fall asleep just where she was. She dimly remem-

bered how, when she was a little girl, and was taken on Sunday trips, she would get too tired to walk and her father used to carry her home. She freed herself from Eric and knelt down beside the old trunk.

"Let's see what you have there," said Eric and knelt down by her side. She laughed softly and in some embarrassment as he opened the trunk. "Gee, look at that," he said gaily. There was an old doll with its hair all askew which had been one of her childhood toys. Then there was an up-to-date doll, slim and dangling, with large pop-eyes. Eric remembered that Nina had won it the first time they had gone to Coney Island together. Then there was a photograph of four grim-faced people in a group. Eric looked at the picture with that quizzical and amused smile of his.

"That was my father," said Nina.

"Is he dead?" asked Eric. He stopped smiling and drew closer to her.

"He was shot during a bank robbery. He was in the police. Didn't I tell you about it?"

"Oh," said Eric, and for a moment neither of them spoke. Nina took the photo out of his hand. "That's me," she said. "It looks as if I'm squinting. I didn't want to be photographed. That's my kid brother and that's my mother."

Eric did not venture to ask any questions. He gave her a sidelong glance. Presently she put the photographs down. "They're all dead—flu——" she said and smiled at him bravely.

He waited for a moment. "Now we're going to make a fresh start, *lille Spurv*," he then said. When she was about to shut the trunk, something got caught in it. Eric proceeded to help her. "Say, what's that?" he asked.

"That's only Dad's revolver," she said and carefully put it back into the trunk.

"Is it loaded?" asked Eric and closed the fastening of the trunk.

"I don't know. We left it just as it was when Dad got killed."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"No. It's only a keepsake."

"Why, you're almost asleep," said Eric and lifted her up. "Come along, I'll put you to bed."

"Where?" asked Nina. He turned out the glimmer of light in the cellar and sought her mouth in the dark. Her head began to swim and everything seemed to move in circles with her. "I'm sure tired," she said as she pulled herself together. Lilian made her appearance at the top of the cellar stairs with a clatter of glasses.

"Are you going to get married down there?" she shouted, "or will you come up here and have a whisky?"

They scurried up the cellar stairs and relieved

Lilian of the glasses. Eric made a grimace when he had drunk. "Where did you get the stuff from?" he asked.

"Old man Philipp's got plenty," said Lilian briefly.

Mr. Philipp, the house-detective at the department stores, also lodged with Mrs. Bradley. Apparently Lilian had wakened him up and wheedled a bottle of whisky out of him. Eric was about to ask a question and thought better of it. Lilian did not seem to bear any grudge against old man Philipp for having searched her. "*Skaal!*" said Eric and emptied his glass. He loathed whisky. "Where's Mrs. Bradley?" he asked. "Gone to bed," replied Lilian. In the course of the night her make-up had faded away, and there was a faint lustre on her tense, dead-white skin.

"Have you ever had your portrait painted?" asked Eric suddenly.

"Catch me stripping for any artists," replied Lilian sharply. Eric burst out laughing.

"There are such things as portraits of ladies fully dressed," he said quizzically.

"Is that so?" said Lilian. She finished her second glass and began to overact the part of an unsophisticated girl. "I always thought that you couldn't sit for your portrait if you'd had your appendix out and there was a scar."

Eric gave a quick glance at Nina, for he knew

that she disliked jokes of that kind. But Nina had fallen asleep in the armchair, just underneath one of the tiny monkeys on the climbing plants which he had magically caused to appear on the wall. Her hand drooped slackly. He went up and touched her as gently as he could. "*Spurv, lille Spurv*," he murmured. She moved her lips but did not utter a sound. He lifted her up. In her sleep she twined her arm round his neck, and he carried her like that to her bed. Lilian stood there holding the whisky bottle, and looked on sardonically as he laid Nina down and came back. He closed the bedroom door and went on smiling.

"How touching," said Lilian.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I only said, 'How touching,' " she repeated.

"You must be quite tired, too, Miss Smith," said Eric and came towards her. "Shall I see you home now?"

"My goodness, Mr. Bengtson," she said, "I'm not the sort of girl who has to be seen home. Besides, I'm not going home. I brought my things with me, and I'm sleeping here."

"Whereabouts here?" he asked with knitted brows.

"Why, with Nina, in your future marriage-bed. Any objections?" she asked mockingly.

"On the contrary, it will be an honour for my future marriage-bed," he replied with a touch of

annoyance. He sat down in the easy-chair, yawned meaningly and waited to see what would happen. He now discovered that he was infernally tired, and they would have to be at the register office by ten o'clock.

"Well, good night and pleasant dreams," said Lilian. She poured out some more whisky for herself and drank it quickly. Eric watched her white throat as she gulped it down.

"Why are you always so sore at me?" she asked when she had finished.

"Protective instinct against a beauty that's too dangerous," he replied after a moment's hesitation. She did not quite grasp the meaning of the words, but his tone of voice gave her an idea of what he was driving at.

"Thanks very much. I'll make a note of that," she said and opened the door. By way of being polite, Eric stood up. His legs ached: he had been on the step-ladder all day. Lilian took out a pocket-mirror and lipstick, and carefully painted her lips. Then she said "Good night" again and closed the door behind her.

Eric dropped back into his chair and began to laugh in spite of himself. He was tired out, and it struck him as enormously funny that Lilian should put make-up on her lips before going to bed. He fetched his great-coat, threw himself on to the shake-down which he had arranged with the help of a mattress, wrapped himself up, and

decided to sleep in his clothes. It would soon be morning, anyway. He switched the light off, and then he heard a car hooting somewhere or other. He closed his eyes. 'My last night as a bachelor,' he thought to himself with a slight twinge in the pit of his stomach. The room was full of Lilian's cheap and nasty scent.

V

AT seven in the morning there was a ring at the bell, and a big surprise. A lady stood at the door and said in decided tones: "I am Countess Bengtson. I have come to my son's wedding."

Mrs. Bradley, who had once been a society lady herself, seized upon her flannel dressing-gown and her presence of mind and replied: "Please step this way, Countess. We're still *en déshabille*, but breakfast will soon be ready."

Countess Bengtson did as she was bidden and came in. She wore a black tailor-made dress and white gloves. In front of the house she had a ramshackle old Ford waiting. She entered the newly decorated room, the door of which Mrs. Bradley held open for her, cast a brief, quizzical glance at the tiny monkeys on the walls, and then came to a standstill by the shake-down on which Eric was asleep beneath his great-coat.

"Mr. Bengtson, I mean Count Bengtson, wasn't expecting you," stammered Mrs. Bradley.

"I myself didn't know whether I could get away," said the Countess, "I work at the Lansdale Lunatic Asylum."

Mr. Bengtson now proceeded to awake. He stretched himself, uttered a few groans, opened his eyes and sat up. "Hallo, Mums," he said with the utmost composure. Mrs. Bradley withdrew discreetly. Straightway a brisk conversation in Danish became audible. Mrs. Bradley rushed through the kitchen, where Skimpy was already making the coffee, and dashed through the back entrance into the room in which the two girls were sleeping. "Get up!" she exclaimed. "Get dressed as quick as you can. His mother's here. She's a countess and he's a count."

Lilian sat up in bed as straight as a ramrod. It took Nina a few minutes to wake, and even then she still kept her eyes shut. "Who?" she asked. "For the love of Mike, wake up," exclaimed Lilian and shook her. "You'll be a countess if you marry him. I'm tickled to death."

All the water-taps in the house now started working, and in all three bathrooms the noise of the showers could be heard. Old man Philipp was ready before anybody else, and made his appearance at the breakfast-table which Skimpy had laid.

"I'm to be the witness," he said, and bowed stiffly to the Countess. He smelt of yesterday's and to-day's whisky. "Pleased to meet you," said the Countess and rubbed her hands together. "I'm still stiff from that darned night journey,"

she added. Old man Philipp thought the matter over. "If I advise you to have a drink, you'll refuse it," he said reflectively. The Countess became animated. "I will not," she replied with emphasis. Mr. Philipp went to fetch a bottle of whisky, just as Mrs. Bradley came in with the coffee. The two girls followed in her wake. Eric was still taking his shower. The Countess looked at the girls for an instant, and then went up to Nina, who stood there shyly and was at a loss what to say.

"Good morning, Nina," she said. "I've dropped in rather suddenly, but I wanted to see who my boy was marrying." She laid both her hands on Nina's shoulders and shook her affably. "You'll have an awful lot of trouble with him."

Nina tried to think what she should say. "I'm called Mums," said the Countess. "I'm glad you've come," said Nina. "This is my friend Lilian. And that's Skimpy—she's a swell cook. She fixed my wedding-cake for me." The Countess made Nina sit down next to her on the sofa, and at the same time she drank the glass of whisky which old man Philipp had placed in front of her. "It does the heart good," she said, and it was not clear whether she meant the bride or the drink.

Lilian sat in the corner and said nothing. So far, this was the first countess she had ever come across. It impressed her more than she would

have cared to admit. She eyed Eric with a more curious curiosity when he came in, his blond hair all slicked back. This was somebody from "on top" joining her circle. Somebody who knew what caviare was. He treated his mother like a cute elder sister and the Countess just romped around with him. During breakfast they heard quite a lot of the Bengtson family history. It seemed that the Countess had become head nurse at Lansdale Lunatic Asylum after her husband, Count Bengtson, had drunk himself to death, as you might say. The Countess had a refreshing manner of calling a spade a spade. The sanatorium for wealthy mental patients where she worked was, in her parlance, a bug-house, and she pointed out that she had gained her experience in the treatment of d.t's from her husband. Eric cheerfully confirmed this. It was now revealed that his father had met his death in a very odd manner. After a royal hunting-party at which all the gentlemen wore red dress-clothes, he had got properly soused, and had laid a wager that, wearing his red dress-clothes, he would mingle with the young bulls in the meadow, won the bet (200 bottles of '79 Pommard), but was gored by the infuriated animals. Mother and son laughed heartily as they retailed this incident.

Nina said little. More than ever before, she realized that she was marrying a foreigner, someone who had not been born in America but had

arrived there by boat. At the register office it turned out that she would henceforth be Countess Bengtson. She could not quite take this in. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked Eric as they took a taxi back to Fieldston.

"What was there to tell you?" he said. "Do you think I ought to wear a crest on my suit when I nail up bunting in the shop window?"

"I like your mother," said Nina shyly.

"She likes you, too," said he and squeezed her hand.

The weather was glorious. The asphalt was gay with sunshine and the cornel-tree was in bloom. When they reached home a number of guests arrived—Miss Drivot and Mr. Berg, Push, the apprentice, and a deputation of saleswomen who had brought a wireless set as a wedding-present. Old man Philipp made a humorous speech: he was quite sober, possibly because he had been scared by the accounts of the treatment for drunkards with which the Countess had regaled them. They sampled the cake which Skimpy had fixed, and praised it to the skies. Mr. Berg showed signs of making a pass at Lilian, and she said: "Lay off, Mr. Berg, be your age." But he did not take it amiss.

Lilian affected a blatant and sardonic jollity. She kept on addressing Nina as "Countess," and each time that she did so, it sounded like an insult.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the Countess announced that she must be off. She invited the young couple to start their honeymoon in her car. Eric kissed them all good-bye. He had drunk nothing, but he seemed to be slightly tipsy. Lilian shrank back towards the wall when he approached her. Miss Drivot continued to giggle blissfully and wiped her mouth. Everybody declared that the bridesmaid must give the bridegroom a kiss. Lilian frowned and moved her lips hastily over the space between Eric and herself. He caught hold of her and drew her towards him. "That's no good," he said, as they all laughed and gathered round. "I want a proper kiss."

Lilian looked vexed. "A proper one, eh?" she asked in a low voice. Suddenly she laid her arms round Eric's neck and kissed him. "Gee whizz!" he said rather breathlessly when she had finished. Nina looked on with a tiny, frozen smile lurking round her mouth. The others had stopped laughing. Push, the apprentice, was twiddling the knobs of the new wireless set which emitted appalling noises.

After much coaxing and wheedling the Countess managed to get her Ford started. Eric and Nina squeezed into the rumble-seat with their week-end suitcase, and off they went. The air was cool and they nestled close together in their wraps.

When it was dusk the Countess stopped at an old inn somewhere in Connecticut. She left the engine running while the two of them got out. "Good night, my boy," she said. "Good night, Mums," said Eric. As it clattered off, the Ford made a din like an overworked sewing-machine. Then there was a lull. Nina gazed around her. She was a little disappointed. When she had been granted a day off for her honeymoon, her idea of it had been somewhat different from this. Plenty of noise, crowds of people, lots of fun. Atlantic City or, at the very least, Long Beach. Here she saw old, old trees, on which the first leaves of the year were just appearing, and a flock of sheep ambling across the road and raising big grey clouds of dust. Between the trees there was a glimpse of the sea. "This is fine, just like Denmark," said Eric and stretched his arms. Nina felt guilty because she did not care for it.

In the evening they heard music in the distance. They followed it up and at last discovered a sort of dance-hall. It was late when they left. They first walked along by the sea and then through the village. Nina had nothing but clouds beneath her feet, and she soared back to the old inn.

In the middle of the night she woke up and held out her hand. Yes, there he was, the man she loved. And on the Tuesday morning the alarm-clock rang as usual.

As usual, too, Nina was still half asleep when

she had got up and was doing her daily dozen—she had read somewhere or other that it kept you young; and she was still half asleep while she was making the coffee, and even at breakfast. She did not wake up properly until they were sitting in the subway together, bound for the Central Stores. As usual, Eric left her at Staircase 5, and she rushed off to clock in at the entrance to Wing No. 6.

And as usual, Miss Drivot remarked: "Hurry up, Nina, you're late again," although, after all, Nina was now a married woman and was entitled to be addressed as Countess Bengtson.

VI

"I'VE been slimming. Just take a peek—I've lost eleven pounds," said Mrs. Thorpe to Lilian.

"You're looking fine, madam," said Lilian and scanned the customer's curves.

"A figure like a schoolgirl. What would madam like to-day? Here we have a linden-green suit with cape, just arrived from Lanvin. You will look charming in it," said Madame Chalon, the *directrice*, with the full weight of her authority.

On this particular occasion Mrs. Thorpe looked really awful. In truth, she had become somewhat thinner, and as a result, four new deep lines had made their appearance in her face. She had had her hair dyed with henna, she smoked cigarette after cigarette, and had the jitters very badly. She was so shaky that her bracelets rattled. She had brought a young man with her. He sprawled on a sofa, carefully arranged the creases in his trousers and gazed at his mauve silk socks.

"*Chéri*, let me have a puff at your cigarette," said Mrs. Thorpe. She stretched out her fingers with the long, pointed nails, removed the cigarette

from his mouth, took a deep draw at it and then gave it back to him. Immediately after this disgusting exhibition, the young man took the cigarette out of his mouth again, inspected the red smear of lipstick on the tip, gazed sleepily around and finally threw it into the nearest chromium ash-tray.

Mrs. Thorpe had noticed nothing of this, but Lilian took stock of the young man and sized him up—a gigolo, was her verdict, and that was the end of it as far as she was concerned. Mrs. Thorpe seemed to be quite wrapped up in the youth, who was much too good-looking, whose black hair was much too sleek, whose teeth were too beautiful, and whose suit was too well cut.

"I'm in a shocking state of nerves," she sighed, and trembled in every limb. "I just can't take it. I need an outfit for the trip. I'm getting right away from here—a trip round the world. Palms, you know what I mean—white linen for the tropics. Have you anything of that kind? You see, I'm getting a divorce. You've no idea what a strain it is on the nerves."

"May I show you our new collection for the south?" asked Madame Chalon and glanced meaningly at Lilian. "EZ twenty-four to thirty-two," she whispered to her. Lilian glided away obsequiously, with that swaying gait which she had been taught at the training school for mannequins. Scarcely had she reached the changing-cubicle

than she hastily began to drag off the black frock she wore when attending to customers. "EZ number twenty-four to thirty-two," she shouted to the two girl apprentices. "Make it snappy. The light green first. The old hen is out to make a big splash."

One of the girls rushed off, but the other stood there flabbergasted. "The green evening frock?" she asked. "Don't be such a dumb cluck. The light grey one with the cape. Get a move on, don't stand there staring at me," shouted Lilian. She always suffered from stage-fright when she had to demonstrate clothes. 'If we sell the collection, I'm going to ask for a percentage, and this time I don't mean maybe,' she thought to herself as she powdered her face and put her hair straight. An unseen but dogged struggle was being waged between her and Madame Chalon. Lilian claimed percentages on the sale if a customer took a frock which she had demonstrated. Madame Chalon, on the other hand, insisted that she, and she alone, had sold the frock—as if Lilian were scarcely anything more than a clothes-peg. Already on two occasions Lilian, freshly besprinkled with scent, had been to see the boss of the section. He had playfully shaken her by the scruff of the neck like a puppy and had told her that a girl with her figure oughtn't to have to bother herself about measly percentages. But that was as far as the matter went.

The girl apprentices came galloping back with a load of frocks under their arms. The poky changing-cubicle, which was known as the monkey-bin, smelt of new fabrics, tailoring and cheap soap. In the corner sat the old tailoress who tried on the alterations. She was munching a sandwich.

"You couldn't have been much longer about it," hissed Lilian, and snatched the linden-green suit from the girl's hands. When she had been a girl apprentice she had been bullied, and now it was her turn to do the bullying. She calmed down a little when the soft material was clinging to her hips. She threw the cape round her, took one more peep into the mirror, and entered the salon without the slightest qualms.

When Mrs. Thorpe caught sight of her, she made a face as if she had toothache. "Why, you must be crazy. That's not my colour," she said irritably. Lilian turned and swayed to and fro in front of her, jerked the cape back and displayed the thin, pleated blouse. The young man on the sofa did not budge, but his sleepy gaze beneath the lowered eyelashes gloated on the blouse.

"Green is the perfect colour to go with madam's auburn hair," declared Madame Chalon as if under oath.

"Do stop worrying me, I'm jittery enough as it is," moaned Mrs. Thorpe. "I can't stand that colour."

Madame Chalon made a sign to Lilian, and Lilian glided away. "Stay where you are, don't go yet," exclaimed Mrs. Thorpe. "You don't know what it is I want. Haven't you anything really tropical? Evening frocks for Hawaii, for instance?"

"The maize-yellow," exclaimed Madame Chalon, beaming as if a great inspiration had just occurred to her. "Miss Smith, show the maize-yellow—a poem, madam, a dream, like music——"

While Lilian was busy changing her frock, she could still hear the gushing patter of the *directrice* who derived her pet phrases from the flowery style of the newspaper advertisements. For some reason or other the changing-room was always stuffy, no doubt because the old tailoress suffered from a chronic cold in the head. Lilian had tiny beads of perspiration on her forehead while she was chivvying the girl apprentices and slipping into the maize-yellow evening frock. This was a structure comprising several layers of tulle, with a coat that bulged out wide at the hem. When Lilian was dressed, her hair was the wrong style for the frock. She fished out her comb and powdered her moist forehead. "Where have you been all this time? The customer's getting annoyed," snapped Madame Chalon, and poked her head in at the door. "I'm coming—I'm not a quick-change artist," answered Lilian

angrily. Each day she made a fresh attempt to get on the right side of the *directrice*, and each day the tension between them became greater. "Don't get in my way," she muttered to the girl apprentice, who was standing by the door. She felt inclined to smack the harmless victim on whom she was venting her bad temper, and who stared at her aghast. But when she once more hovered into Mrs. Thorpe's ken, she was smiling her sweetest mannequin smile.

"Well?" said the *directrice* proudly, while Lilian turned, glided to and fro, and started on a few dance steps as she lifted the flounces in both hands.

"Not bad," said Mrs. Thorpe after a pause.

"Not bad, madam? This frock is a dream—it's the Hawaii moon—we have a maize-yellow wrap to match, with a mantilla—if you want to stroll on deck in the evening."

Madame Chalon knew her customers inside out. For a moment a dreamy expression appeared on Mrs. Thorpe's hard, drawn features. "Can't you keep still for a moment?" she said to Lilian snappishly. Lilian at once stood still. The back of the frock, cut very low, was turned towards the onlookers, and in order not to appear discourteous, Lilian looked round over her shoulder and smiled at Mrs. Thorpe.

The young man now seemed to be wide awake. He sat there bolt upright, and actually stopped smoking. Lilian despised him as deeply as a girl,

who has not yet sold herself, can despise a man who sells himself. Suddenly she noticed him quite slowly lowering an eyelid, while his beautiful teeth gleamed. It was a plain and impudent message behind Mrs. Thorpe's back. Lilian stared at him in amazement. She was accustomed to effrontery, but this was really going too far. The young man now took out a visiting-card and slipped it between the cushions of the sofa on which he was sitting. He had left her his address. Lilian began to move quickly to and fro once more, for she would otherwise have had to burst out laughing.

"Do stand still—come over here," Mrs. Thorpe shouted to her. With her swaying gait she walked across towards the customer. Seen at such close quarters, Mrs. Thorpe looked a rather ghastly sight. Suddenly Lilian felt a spasm of the hatred which she so often experienced for the customers in the fashion salon. She became aware of how slender and lissom and well-made she herself was in the frock. It was a shame that this unwieldy old creature should wear it. She flushed hotly at being treated like a lifeless object. Madame Chalon and Mrs. Thorpe moved round her, fumbled with her or, rather, with the frock and exchanged expert comment. "It ought to be shortened a bit," said Mrs. Thorpe. "That would give it more style," replied the *directrice*. At this moment Lilian felt a twinge of pain in her

bare back. "Ooh!" she gasped and turned round. "What's the matter?" asked Madame Chalon with disapproval. "I don't know. I'm sorry," murmured Lilian. She passed two fingers over the spot that hurt and then discovered that there was blood on them. Mrs. Thorpe suddenly exclaimed: "My ring, where's my ring?"

The young man stood up as Lilian gazed at her finger-tips. He bent down and extricated a ring from the tulle of the frock in which it had got caught. It was a flamboyant ring with a square-cut emerald enclosed with small diamonds. "Here's your ring, *chérie*," he said in sweetish accent and slipped it back on to Mrs. Thorpe's finger.

"That shows you how thin I've got," she exclaimed triumphantly, "even my rings are too big for me now." She thrust her hand beneath the young man's nose by way of proof. It was a slack white hand, with long, pointed finger-nails. The ring wobbled about on the finger that had become too thin for it. The young man must have wondered for a moment what was expected of him, but then he bowed and kissed Mrs. Thorpe's hand. "These Europeans—aren't they charming?" she said gushingly, and exchanged a feminine glance with Madame Chalon, who came from Paris. Nobody troubled about Lilian.

Perhaps there would have been no sequel to all this if Mrs. Thorpe had apologized to Lilian for the scratch, which was still bleeding and causing

her twinges of pain. But Mrs. Thorpe omitted to do so. Probably it never entered her mind that a mannequin, too, is a human being, with desires and longings, and capable of flying into a temper. "See that the frock doesn't get soiled, Miss Smith," said Madame Chalon, and that only made matters worse. She must have noticed something in Lilian's face to alarm her, for she suddenly became coy, and added: "Now you'll be able to tell everyone that you've been scratched by a real emerald."

At this juncture the young man took a delicate cambric handkerchief out of his breast-pocket and with it dabbed at the drops of blood on Lilian's back. "Mustn't let the pretty frock get spoilt," he said, and Lilian did not know whether the remark was meant to be spiteful or whether it was merely stupid.

"Do you like the frock, *chéri*? Do you think I ought to buy it?"

The young man straightened himself and looked at Mrs. Thorpe. Heaven alone knows what the expression on his face revealed to her, but it must have been something or other that his radiant smile and his almond-shaped eyes could not conceal quickly enough. At all events her mood underwent a sudden change. "I don't like it," she said curtly. "I won't have it. The frock is too wide. Take it away and show me something else."

She fidgeted nervously with the ring that was now too big for her finger. "I want something quite simple—white linen—something that I can wear for the polo matches at Singapore without being pointed at by the English."

Lilian looked at the *directrice*. "Demonstrate number thirty-four," said Madame Chalon rather wearily. Mrs. Thorpe raised an emphatic protest. "Please don't bother to demonstrate anything else," she exclaimed. "I'll try the things on myself. There's no point in seeing how well they fit the mannequin. I'm the one who's got to wear them."

"Quite, quite," agreed Madame Chalon obsequiously. Behind the customer's back she flung an imploring glance heavenward. "Bring in number thirty-four, Miss Smith—the white linen tailor-made."

Lilian glided away and returned to the monkey-bin.

"What's wrong?" asked the old tailoress, as Lilian savagely dragged off the maize-yellow frock and slipped into her black business dress.

"The old hen's afraid I might get off with her gigolo," said Lilian. "She should worry. Why, a girl like me wouldn't even spit on a fellow of that sort."

Mrs. Thorpe was more jealous than even Lilian had supposed. When she returned with the white tailor-made number thirty-four, and

Madame Chalon was escorting the customer into one of the trying-on cubicles, there was a slight pause.

"Please come with us and see the frock being tried on," said Mrs. Thorpe, and her tone was one which brooked no contradiction. "With pleasure," replied Lilian, so politely that it sounded almost like insolence. Recently there had been several occasions when she had felt her nerves giving way. It had started shortly before Nina's wedding, in all probability on the evening when she had found herself under suspicion of having stolen the Russian icons. Since then the feeling had become stronger and stronger, until she was filled with a queer foreboding that a disaster would happen before very long, and that the whole store would be blown up or burnt down, leaving only a mere handful of cold ashes behind. The tiny scratch was smarting quite badly, and she felt a violent desire to grab Mrs. Thorpe by her dyed hair. The customer seemed to notice the tension, or else it was that she still felt jealous, although she had manœuvred the mannequin away from the young man's presence. She hummed and hawed. She tried frocks on and took them off again, sent the *directrice* for a fresh selection, the girl apprentices raced to and fro, the rejected models bulged on the dress-hangers. Mrs. Thorpe made a special point of not letting Lilian out of her sight for an instant. The air

was close in the cubicle, and the figures of the three women were reproduced threefold in the tall, composite trying-on mirror. It created the impression that a regular crowd was trying to move about in the poky cubicle, and Mrs. Thorpe complained of feeling giddy. Madame Chalon hurried off obligingly to fetch her a glass of water. Lilian did her best to control the expression on her face so that the customer should not notice how the mannequin loathed the sight of her. Mrs. Thorpe had now been squeezed into a black lace frock, from which her shoulders emerged with far too big a display of naked flesh.

All that happened afterwards began when Mrs. Thorpe clutched at the waist-belt behind her. The emerald ring slipped from the finger which had become too thin for it and fell noiselessly on to the grey-pink carpet which covered the floor of the trying-on cubicle and, indeed, embellished all the rooms belonging to the fashion salon.

Lilian did not stop to reflect. Perhaps she did not even realize what she was doing. With a spontaneous and instinctive movement she covered the ring with her foot, instead of picking it up and returning it with a polite phrase.

Madame Chalon arrived with the glass of water, which Mrs. Thorpe drank appreciatively. Lilian was standing on the ring and could feel the emerald like a focus of glowing heat under her foot. With a muffled lamentation Mrs. Thorpe drew

the narrow frock over her head. Suddenly she lost interest. After having been a nuisance to *directrice* and saleswoman for more than an hour, she decided on the spur of the moment that she would buy nothing. "It all looks too cheap. I'll have my travel outfit made in Paris. I know a splendid little tailoress there," she said. It sounded exceedingly catty and snobbish. Madame Chalon had suddenly become Lilian's ally. "Just as madam wishes," she said pertly. She looked at Lilian as much as to say: "I wish the old cow would get to hell out of this." She did not even care if the mirror enabled Mrs. Thorpe to catch a glimpse of this meaning look or not. "Would you mind tidying up here?" said the *directrice* as she showed the customer out. The cubicle was littered with tulle, taffeta, chiffon flounces and furbelows and flowery tailored dreams suitable for nights in Hawaii.

When Lilian had picked up the ring, put it on and looked at it, she began to tremble. It was not only fear and agitation, it was also that passion, that uncontrollable itch deep down within her which she always felt in the presence of costly things. She pulled the ring off again, just in time to hide it as the two girl apprentices came in. "Nothing doing?" said one of them with a touch of malice.

"Mind your own business," retorted Lilian snappishly. She was holding the ring in her

clenched fist and did not know what to do with it. She grabbed at the white linen tailor-made number thirty-four model Emily, and held it tight. "I'll put everything straight," she said, and picked a few pins up from the floor. The girls departed.

Lilian thrust the ring into the right-hand pocket of the white linen model, arranged the jacket and blouse carefully on the hanger and took the whole lot back to the stock-room. She covered it with the cellophane wrapping which prevented the light material from getting soiled, took a deep breath, and left it hanging there among dozens of other summer models which were ready for sale.

Half an hour later Mrs. Thorpe came fluttering back. It was now half-past five and the weary saleswomen were serving the last impatient customers. There was a buzz of suppressed excitement when it became known that the ring was missing. Old man Philipp was sent for, and the surging of the waves reached as far as Mr. Crosby's sanctum on the eighteenth storey of the central tower. Although Mrs. Thorpe made a terrible fuss, she could not state positively that she had lost the ring in the fashion salon and nowhere else. On the contrary, Madame Chalon distinctly remembered that she had seen the ring, and, in fact, that she herself had given it back to her. The gigolo, when called as a witness, made some sleepy remarks which proved to be of no use at all. Old man Philipp fixed his penetrating and suspicious

gaze on the young man. He didn't like the look of him. Two men of the private police employed by the store remained unobtrusively in the background, but their services were not required. A thorough search was made but nothing was found. At last Mrs. Thorpe had to admit that she had left the store in a taxi, the number of which she did not know. After that she had been in the Olympia Bar, had drunk two cocktails there, had spent a few minutes with her dressmaker in Madison Avenue, and had not discovered her loss until she was in a second taxi.

The authorities of the store expressed their regrets, and promised to investigate the matter further. Then the good lady, in a dreadful flurry, was ceremoniously shown to the door, as it was now closing-time. In point of fact, Mrs. Thorpe was insured against loss, but it was rather embarrassing for her to broach the subject to Mr. Thorpe, from whom she was getting a divorce. When the bell which was the signal for closing-time had stopped ringing, old man Philipp invited a small group of employees into his office to be searched. Madame Chalon was one of them and this upset her so much that she started talking French and asked for her dismissal. The two girl apprentices were weeping. Lilian remained calm and collected. "This'll soon be part of the regular routine," she said sarcastically as the sick-nurse watched her while she undressed—for

although being searched was a nasty business, it was done in a very considerate manner. "Sorry, kid," growled old man Philipp afterwards. There was a look of distress on his good-humoured face which looked like that of an old seal. As usual he smelt of whisky. Ever since he had become better acquainted with Lilian on Nina's wedding-day, he had shown signs of being partial to her.

"How did you come by that?" asked the sick-nurse, as some drops of blood began to trickle again from the scratch on Lilian's back.

"Mrs. Thorpe did that for me with her precious ring," said Lilian contemptuously. She felt as reckless as a tight-rope performer on a very high and a very thin rope. "Wait a moment—I'll put some iodine on it," said the sick-nurse. The wound smarted a little, and Lilian regarded this as a sign of good luck.

The ring remained four days in the pocket of the white tailor-made dress, model Emily, number thirty-four. Nobody bought it, for in the meanwhile a spell of wet weather had set in, and mackintoshes and umbrellas were in more demand.

On the fifth day the weather cleared up, and in the afternoon Lilian displayed the model to a lady who had a good figure and who bought it on the spot. At the last moment Lilian contrived to remove the ring from the pocket and hide it in her stocking.

She was sick with agitation. If a doctor had felt her pulse, he would have discovered that she was feverish. If, that day, old man Philipp had taken it into his head to search her, she would have been done for. But old man Philipp had other things to worry about.

That night, behind her partition in the basement where her parents lived, she lay awake, switching the light on and off and on again. On the other side of the partition her father grumbled at her. But she could not sleep. She had to keep looking at the ring.

Now she, Lilian, had an emerald ring: her own ring, her own secret—and the danger, too, was her own.

VII

FROM the fifteenth storey of the central tower upwards there were notices galore: "Quiet Please." There was no escaping this notice, which was more in the nature of a command. Nobody could help seeing it as soon as he stepped out of the lift. It was displayed on the doors of the board-rooms where the future of the Central Stores Company Inc. was discussed, and it was displayed at the entrances of the private offices of the highest chiefs.

Mr. Crosby held sway right at the top on the eighteenth storey, in an office which had tall windows facing the four points of the compass, and which looked more like the head-quarters of a lighthouse-keeper. On clear days there was a view of both the Hudson and the East River, and also of the hills far away in New Jersey. But the view left Mr. Crosby quite cold. He had other things on his mind. The Company's shares were shaping badly, and he held 51 per cent of them—just enough to give him the whip hand at meetings of the shareholders.

A blight of depression and discontent had clung to the general meeting. Although the store

seemed to be doing a lot of trade, last year's business had ended in the red. Mr. Crosby performed huge exploits of mental arithmetic, but failed to hit on a scheme for warding off disaster. Taxation, gentlemen, taxation—it's not a thing to cry from the house-tops, but the policy recently adopted in this country is little short of camouflaged communism.

Mr. Crosby had a mathematical memory, and where figures, shares and stock-quotations were concerned, he was as reliable as a tape-machine. On the other hand, he was always forgetting the faces of his grandchildren and the birthdays of his friends. He suffered from diabetes, too, did Mr. Crosby, and that was a great drain upon his supply of happiness. He drank sugarless tea and with it he would eat a diabetic rusk which tasted like cardboard. His teeth had fallen out, one after another. Just lately he had been worried by a small sore on his big toe. For though the sore was, in itself, a mere nothing, with anyone suffering from diabetes it might signify the worst. Mr. Crosby had cold, flabby hands with prominent veins; that morning he had signed a resolution by which two hundred members of the staff were to be dismissed. Nobody liked him, and there was not a single person in the world for whom he had any regard. There were times when it seemed to him that he could feel the skyscraper rocking gently to and fro. According to

the calculations of the engineers, the top of the central tower swayed to and fro about four inches daily. Mr. Crosby's fortune was generally estimated at about thirty-four millions.

Philipp, the house-detective, saw his supreme chief for the first time shortly after Mrs. Thorpe's ring had disappeared. That morning he had drunk a bigger tot of whisky than usual, for he felt the need of solace. He now stood face to face with his master, and had an uneasy feeling that the slight percentage of alcohol in his blood might be noticed.

Mr. Crosby gazed for some time at his underling before uttering a word.

"Your name's Philipp? Philipp Philipp?" he asked at length, reading the name from a scribbling-block that a secretary had placed before him.

"That's so, Mr. Crosby. One of my dad's little jokes," replied old man Philipp in hushed and deferential tones.

"How old are you?"

"A little over fifty-eight," murmured Philipp. In actual fact it was only three days before his sixtieth birthday, but he was ashamed to say so.

Mr. Crosby looked narrowly at his detective. "You drink," he then said. It was not a question but an assertion.

"A little drop now and then—to keep myself

awake, I do night-work as well—sometimes I'm on duty for twenty hours at a stretch."

"You have a staff under you, haven't you? Isn't the work done in shifts?"

"Yes, but I don't altogether rely on the younger detectives. Especially since—since—we had one or two bad breaks, I haven't felt easy in my mind—can't get any sleep. So I prefer to make the round at night myself——"

"All this snooping around of yours doesn't seem to have got us anywhere," said Mr. Crosby, now rather more amiably. He could understand that a man might prefer keeping watch in the store to sleeping in his bed. He himself spent his life in this tower, and he failed to understand how other people could take trips to Florida or go off duck-shooting.

"Mr. Crosby," said Philipp earnestly and moved closer to the desk, "I admit we've had quite a lot of bad breaks. Things will happen that way. But I give you my word that I'll work twice as hard—I'll stop all that racket if it's the last thing I do—and when once I——"

"All that talk's no good to me," said Mr. Crosby. He had moved back a little as Philipp with his whisky-laden breath drew closer to him, and now he became cantankerous again. "I didn't send for you to hear your excuses, but to tell you that we'll have to dismiss you the very next time there's a case of theft, however trifling."

This was followed by a brief hush. Then the secretary rustled a sheet of paper as an outlet for his trepidation.

"Dismiss me—you don't really mean that, Mr. Crosby," said old man Philipp after a while. "I've worked in the Central Stores ever since the start. That's close on twenty-seven years, Mr. Crosby——"

"I'm sorry, Philipp," said Mr. Crosby, "but you know as well as I do that you're not equal to your job. One day or other that happens to all of us. Even I'll have to quit one of these days, and I'll know quick enough when my time has come. I expect my employees to do the same."

"You haven't found a better man for the job yet," said Philipp, who felt that Mr. Crosby meant what he said. "I—the Central Stores mean everything to me. It's not just because I work here, or because I'm on the pay-roll—I can still find a job whenever I want—but the Central Stores—that's just like my home—I haven't got a home of my own—I'm a bachelor—I've spent my whole life in the Central Stores—you can't just get rid of me like that because a few things get stolen. I belong to the Central Stores—pardon me, Mr. Crosby, if I've been talking out of my turn."

Mr. Crosby pondered. Then he swerved from the main topic. "Have the police discovered

anything yet about Mrs. Thorpe's ring?" he asked in matter-of-fact tones.

"No, they've let the matter drop. That's another one of those things that we get the blame for, although it's practically certain that the ring wasn't lost on our premises. But these females always make themselves a nuisance."

"Let me inform you that Mrs. Thorpe is one of our best customers and a society lady. Her husband is a friend of mine."

"Pardon me, Mr. Crosby. Anyway, it was Mrs. Thorpe herself who put a stop to all further enquiries, and if you asked me why, I could tell you the reason."

Mr. Crosby looked at his detective. He had spoken to Mrs. Thorpe only twice in his life, for his friendship with Mr. Thorpe, an attorney, meant only that they belonged to the same club. At bottom, he shared Philipp's aversion to the lady.

"You realize that it's unfair to drop any such hints," he said. Philipp shot a glance at the young secretary. He was pining for a drop of whisky. He felt thoroughly wretched.

"Mrs. Thorpe hushed the whole thing up because she was scared of finding out that her—friend stole the ring. That's the whole story," he said, and took a deep breath.

"Did she say so?" asked Mr. Crosby.

Old man Philipp could not help smiling at such

guileless ideas on the part of a man who owned a department store.

"Say so? You don't know women, Mr. Crosby," he exclaimed. "Why, she'd never admit a thing like that, even to herself. But it doesn't make matters any easier for me, I can tell you, Mr. Crosby."

The slight tingle of curiosity which Mr. Crosby had felt for a moment now disappeared. He was left with only a sharp twinge of annoyance that this underling, who was fuddled with drink, objected to the idea of being fired. He opened the middle drawer of his desk and took out a small bottle of medicine. The secretary obsequiously handed him a glass of water into which he counted out twenty drops of the medicine. The mixture had a nasty, bitter taste. There were times when the ailing Mr. Crosby was overcome by self-disgust. His arm bore a medley of scars caused by the injections of insulin, and these scars had recently shown alarming signs of inflammation.

"Well, Mr. Philipp, that's that," he said by way of bringing the interview to a close, "the next time any trouble starts, you're dismissed. Thank you."

That sounded final. It left no loophole for a reply.

"Thank *you*, Mr. Crosby," said Philipp and withdrew. As soon as he was outside he took

the first opportunity of recovering slightly from his exhaustion by leaning for a few minutes against the wall, close to the notice demanding quiet. Then he proceeded down the staircase which led from the eighteenth storey to the twelfth. Philipp had a queer habit of using the staircase rather than the lift. He had professional reasons for this. Three times in his career he had caught wrongdoers on the staircase where they had imagined themselves free from observation. Ten minutes later he reached his office, summoned his staff of assistant detectives, who were just a set of toughs without any ideas of subtlety, and urged them to keep their eyes peeled. Then he finished his bottle of whisky without troubling to use a glass or to add any soda-water, and began to draw up a scheme for fighting against the threat of dismissal.

VIII

THE employees of the department store were aware of what occurred only in their own tiny section of it, to which they had become closely attached like coral insects to a rock at the bottom of the sea. But old man Philipp, who roved untiringly all over it, was aware of the store as a whole, as a world in itself. He spotted a thousand and one details as he prowled about the store. He had a harmless face like a seal, and though his eyes were bleary with drink, they were very alert.

On and on he strolled, up the moving staircase, through the glass-covered yards, across the boundless tracts of the sales departments. In the lingerie section women were waging a pitched battle, for everything was marked down to a dollar on that particular day. In the tea-room three musicians were playing the latest hits, which were heard once again in the music department, where an anæmic girl sat at a piano and played every piece that was placed before her. She did this with about as much expression as if she were fast asleep, and some of the syncopated passages sounded rather spectral. Lorry after lorry drove

into yard number five, and bales of goods were unloaded, checked, recorded and added to the stock. Then there were the customers, the women who bought recklessly because they were too weak to resist, and the other kind who lingered in corners working out sums with tightly pressed lips, but finally decided to buy nothing. There were, too, the young negro lift-attendants who amid a jostle of women announced the number of each storey as they stopped at it, and their voices sounded as if they were lifeless machines, blind, deaf and devoid of feelings.

And at break of day serried ranks of charwomen would muster there to polish the linoleum. During the night the watchmen made their way through the semi-darkness and set the clocking-in apparatus. In the cellar there was a compartment where the wax figures from the shop-windows were stored. Naked, with a mincing smile, they stood in long rows by the wall. A few arms and legs lay on the floor beside them, and they all had a queerly expectant look on their faces. On the fourteenth storey were the strong-rooms containing the safes, which were walled in, protected by a complicated secret patent and guarded day and night. On pay-day the employees stood in long queues and waited for their envelopes. The cashiers were stationed behind gratings. They were completely penned in among iron rods and alarm signals. On their

thumbs they wore rubber rings, to prevent their skin from getting badly chafed by the large quantities of money which they counted out.

Then there were the tape-machines in the administrative premises where hundreds of typewriters clattered and tinkled. There was a little bunch of flowers on the table of one of the typists, and there was, too, the solitary sunbeam which at the stroke of noon fell into the gloomy packing-room. There were the conversations in the ladies' lavatory where the girls hurriedly smoked a cigarette when they were tired, and the jokes which the heads of the departments swapped in *their* lavatory. There were desks with six telephones, with four telephones, with two telephones. There were desks with twenty bells, and there were people who had to jump up as soon as a bell rang. There was a whole cluster of buildings filled with the fever of buying and selling: the place all throbbed with it, and anything could be had for money.

There were long counters on which the price-tickets were prepared and fastened to the goods. This process interested old man Philipp. He used to stand there for a long time watching, and wondering how an elegant model ever came to be cast aside among the trashy clearance bargains, or why a handsome piece of furniture was shoved into the basement where the cheap and nasty goods were sold. "What becomes of the shop-

soiled stuff?" he would ask. Nobody knew. "And what becomes of the stuff that won't sell?" he asked over and over again. Apparently there was a firm that bought up all the useless stuff. They took charge of all the stock which had become useless, and shipped it off to New Guinea or to some such regions inhabited by savages. This gave old man Philipp plenty of food for thought. He was also part of these throw-outs. He had become useless, twenty-seven years in the Central Stores had made him useless. Towards evening, after he had swilled down another half-bottle of whisky, he always felt just as if he were walking about with a vast price-ticket pinned to his back, the original figures on which had been crossed out and replaced by much smaller ones.

Those were the days when furtive whispers filled the Stores with uneasiness. Somehow or other it had leaked out that a reduction of the staff had been decided on. Many women like Mrs. Bradley were scared by the thought of dismissal. They made desperate attempts to hold their own against the forces of flapperdom, the fresh, wispy, scatter-brained chits of girls. Mrs. Bradley had a queer pain in her side which she did her best not to think about. In the evening Skimpy would get a hot-water bottle ready for her, and then Mrs. Bradley would make some excuse and go to bed, while Skimpy sat up and played rummy with old man Philipp and the

Bengtsons. They played for chocolate kisses—little black sweets which the confectionery department of the Central Stores had bought up in vast quantities and then failed to dispose of. At last they had been sold in the canteen to the staff at cut rates. Skimpy cheated without turning a hair, and shouted for joy when she won. Philipp always lost, because he could not remember which cards had been played, although he was a good chess-player. Sometimes, when he did not notice, Nina would eye him with a glance of pity and concern.

The worst of it was that he had given up drinking, and no longer went to the Central Stores in the evening. He had become scared of being there at night, and scared of himself as well. Sometimes he fancied that he might yield to temptation and steal a bottle of whisky from the provision department. A drinker who gives up alcohol suffers severely from shivering fits and aching limbs. During the time when he steered clear of drink old man Philipp scored one small success, but he also made one serious blunder.

One evening he discovered a boy who, during business hours, had hidden himself behind one of the tall rolls of carpet which stood along the walls of the carpet repository. It was sheer instinct which had caused old man Philipp to look behind these rolls, and he had thereupon pulled the young wrongdoer out by the ears. The police

came and fetched the young scamp, who was under sixteen. He swore that he had never meant to steal anything, but only wanted to have a chance of playing by himself with the gadgets in the sports department. Even old man Philipp could not help feeling that his achievement had fallen rather flat.

But three days later this is what happened to him: While he was patrolling the store near the western entrance, where all kinds of oddments were displayed in small job-lots, he noticed a man and a woman who were behaving in a suspicious manner. He knew that he had seen the couple before, but his brain was muddled by teetotalism and sobriety, and defied his attempts to obtain further details. The man was a typical smart-looking crook. He was younger than the woman, whose hair was dyed and who was carefully made-up. She seemed to be agitated. Philipp trailed them among the crowds which at this particular hour, towards noon, surged through the store.

He had put on a hat and overcoat so as to look like a customer, and while he was leaning against a pillar and watching the couple, he felt wretchedly limp and giddy. Nevertheless, he still retained some of his old eagerness for the chase, and moreover, he was anxious to prove to Mr. Crosby that he was still worth his salt.

The pair of suspects elbowed their way from the leather goods to the perfumery. They then

separated and stood at different counters—he among the gloves and she among the handkerchiefs—and Philipp now distinctly saw them furtively making signs to each other. His heart began to beat a little. He slipped round the pillar as they moved on, and kept his eye on them. They reached a counter on which silver-plated goods were displayed—nothing of any great value, things that looked worth more than they really were, cocktail-shakers, tea-pots and dessert-trays. Once again Philipp's head began to swim. Nevertheless he distinctly saw the woman slip something into her hand-bag and make a sign to the man, whereupon they both casually pushed their way towards the exit.

They were only a yard or two from the door when he caught them up. He laid his hand on the woman's bag and said in a low voice: "Come with me, please, and don't make a fuss."

"What's the matter, Mr. Philipp?" asked the lady, and when he heard her voice he felt a sudden misgiving. He might still have managed to smooth matters over, but at that very moment one of his junior detectives came to his assistance. This novice clutched the man's hands in a police grip and said: "Cut out the rough stuff, brother. You've been grabbing plenty."

The fat was now in the fire. The man protested, the woman began to scream. A crowd gathered round, the house police in their big

boots came hurrying up. The whole affair moved forward as relentlessly as a Greek tragedy.

The woman turned out to be Mrs. Thorpe. Nothing incriminating was found in her handbag. Her companion threatened to bring an action for defamation of character. The scene ended in the white-tiled first-aid ward, after Mrs. Thorpe had gone into hysterics. The sick-nurse stirred up some bromide in a glass of water, and Push, the apprentice, who always turned up where anything of interest was happening, fetched the car for the two suspects.

"If I'd been canned, a thing like that wouldn't have happened to me," said Philipp. He realized that this time he would be fired.

Mr. Crosby gave him three months' pay by way of a breathing-space to find another job. He was told that his services could now be dispensed with. A new, young head detective, full of pep, was appointed. His name was Richard Cromwell, he had been in the navy, and was soon known to all as "Toughy." From the very first day the saleswomen all adored him, and he strutted about like a sultan with three hundred wives.

Old man Philipp sat at home, played rummy for chocolate kisses, and did his best to keep away from drink. The Central Stores could do without him, he was well aware of that, but how in the name of goodness could he do without the Central Stores?

IX

"SOMEBODY ought to have an idea how we're to boost the new garter," said Mr. Sprague, the Old Boy, the master of window-dressing. "The Central Stores have put some money in the patent, I guess. Fidelia, it's called. Some such rubbish. Our patent. Won't tear the stockings. We've got to dress a whole window with it. It's a tough proposition—I can't hang sixty thousand pairs of garters in the window. Or should we rig up a tree with garters growing on it?"

"We've only just had a tree with neck-ties growing on it," said Eric Bengtson, who was sitting on a step-ladder painting a more than life-size picture of a lady with a great deal of leg visible. This was to be placed outside on the frontage. "I must put on my thinking cap," he said. He put on his thinking cap and began to whistle:

"With you I'd go to Bali and under the palms I'd lie,
With you I'd see Australia and to the moon I'd fly.
With you—with you——"

"Stop, I've got an idea," he said. "Sixteen wax figures, all showing their knees and wearing

the garter. We've got to make the people see that it doesn't tear the stocking."

"How can we make them see that?" asked the Old Boy pityingly. Eric on his step-ladder lapsed once more into deep thought. "We need a real girl," he observed presently.

"How do you mean?"

"A real girl. Sixteen wax figures and a real girl, dressed just the same as the wax figures. She shows her knees and demonstrates that the stocking doesn't tear. Swell. There's your idea."

For a while the Old Boy said nothing. He was turning the idea over in his decorative head. "Not so bad," he then grunted.

"She must have lovely legs," announced Eric from his step-ladder. The Old Boy seemed to wake up. "They've all got lovely legs," he said. Eric came down from his step-ladder and began, there and then, to make a sketch of the frock in which the sixteen wax figures and the real girl were to be featured.

"We must look for a girl—we've got plenty of pretty girls in the Central Stores," he said, pondering deeply.

"I'll do the looking," replied the Old Boy.

He started on his quest the same day, strolling through the premises in what seemed to be an aimless manner, and taking a peep at the girls when they were climbing about on staircases and step-ladders. He managed to derive a lot of

enjoyment from his task, but he accomplished nothing definite. On the next day the staff superintendent took the matter in hand. It was decided that the garter was to be displayed for a week in Window 7, north wing. Eric at once began to design the background. The girl in the window was to get ten dollars extra a day, a stupendous amount compared with the weekly pittance which she had been receiving before her legs were taken into consideration. Thereupon the prettiest girls of the Central Stores were summoned to the window-dressing studio and paraded there. The prettiest girls—that meant the mannequins and the pupils who were being trained as mannequins. Whispering and giggling they submitted themselves to the scrutiny of Mr. Sprague, and although it was a matter of legs only, they had made up their faces so as to produce the most thrilling effect. They were all ambitious, and the prospect of spending a week in the shop-window appealed to them as an exciting adventure which might also prove to be their big chance.

There was no doubt that Lilian Smith had the loveliest legs. She was first included in the short list, and in the end she outstripped all the other competitors. The Old Boy strutted along the row of girls like a general reviewing his troops, with Eric behind him as a sort of adjutant. He discussed the relative merits of the girls quite openly, for long years of contact with wax figures

had blunted his susceptibilities to other people's feelings. Behind the Old Boy's back Eric Bengtson was making faces which sent the girls into fits of laughter. In the end Mr. Sprague sent them all away, Lilian included.

"What's wrong with her legs?" asked Eric in astonishment, when he was alone again with his boss.

"We can't use her. She's not the proper type. She looks a bit fast."

"What of it?" asked Eric, to whom Lilian was no novelty.

"Young fellow," said Mr. Sprague, "you may have quite slick ideas about window-dressing, but you don't know the first thing about salesmanship. You see, we want to sell sixty thousand dog-gone pairs of Fidelia garters. And to whom? Tell me that. To the average folks, the housewives who have to be economical with their stockings, to the two million women who get as mad as a wet hen when they see a girl like this Smith dame. If we put her in the window, we'll have a mob of men in front of our north wing, but we'll have all the patent garters left on our hands."

"Well, what are we to do about it?" asked Eric, who was beginning to feel bored.

"We've got to find the right type," replied the Old Boy. "There must be girls who have lovely legs and at the same time are nice girls. I'll have another try on my own account. The staff super-

intendent is a sap. We must strike out for ourselves."

In the wake of his boss Eric sauntered through the store. In the meanwhile, the news of what they were after had got about, and all the girls saw to it that their legs could not be ignored. Even the older contingent, represented by Miss Drivot in the china and glass department, considered themselves in the running, as faces didn't matter for this particular purpose.

"Stop. That's the one we'll take," said Mr. Sprague suddenly. "She's the type I've been looking for like a gold-prospector. Something quite out of the common. A girl who's got a pretty face and who looks respectable just the same. That's the right one, believe me. She'll make the women rush to buy our garters."

"I think you're wrong," faltered Eric. The girl who had aroused Mr. Sprague's delight was Nina, of all people. "She's too shy for the shop-window," he added, and tried to hustle the Old Boy along.

"How do you know she's shy? I suppose you made a pass at her and got turned down. That's just the kind of girl we want."

"You can't put her into the shop-window, and that's all there is to it," snapped Eric. But as for months past he had very adroitly been inducing the Old Boy always to do what he advised him not to do, and to avoid the things he suggested, the

objections which he now raised served merely to strengthen the Old Boy's resolve.

"What's your name, miss?" shouted Mr. Sprague up the step-ladder, without paying any further heed to his assistant.

"Nina," said Nina. She now caught sight of her husband, and her face became radiant.

"Come down from there," said the Old Boy. "I've got something to say to you."

"Don't trouble to come down, Nina," said Eric. "I won't have my wife standing in the shop-window and showing off her knees."

Mr. Sprague gasped. Then he said:

"That's right. Of course, you're married, aren't you? But listen, you've got no right to lay down the law to your wife like that. Maybe she'd be tickled to death to earn something extra."

Nina had climbed down from her step-ladder, and was now standing beside Eric—not so close as to make it look like a private deal, but not far away from him either.

"How much extra?" she asked.

"Seventy dollars a week," said the Old Boy. "Aside from the bulge you'll get out of it in other ways."

Mr. Berg, the senior floor-walker, joined them, and Miss Drivot sidled past with a peevish look on her face. By now it was common knowledge that Nina had been chosen for the shop-window. Everybody congratulated her, and seemed to

regard it as an honour and a distinction. In the ladies' lavatories there was a twitter of envious comments, and the twelve storeys were agog with the news.

"I won't have my wife shoved into the shop-window," said Eric, stark with anger.

"But you'll be tickled to death about the money, and besides, you'll be doing the Central Stores a great favour. I feel pretty certain that Mr. Crosby himself would appreciate it," said the wily Mr. Sprague—and Eric vowed at the first opportunity to get even with him for that. During the process of window-dressing he might contrive to drop a small hammer on that foxy noddle of his.

That evening, when they were travelling home in the subway, there was quite a rumpus. Eric insisted that on no account was Nina to have anything to do with this scheme. Nina could not make him out. He had always been happy-go-lucky, and he took nothing seriously, because he was an artist, and now he wanted to be starchy at the worst possible moment. But she had got an idea of her own fixed in her docile little head. Seventy dollars would pay the first instalment on a small Ford—and after that they would take their chance. There was nothing Eric wanted so much as a small Ford, and before very long he would be having a birthday.

"I don't care whether you like it or not—I'm going to do it," she said. "We have to make

good, and we can't afford to turn down an offer of that kind. And anyway, there's no need for you to make such a fuss about it. In the shop-window I shan't have to put up with anything like the amount of monkey business that comes my way when I'm serving customers."

Mrs. Bradley sided with Nina. "She's right," she said; "they'd be sore at her if she didn't do it."

Eric continued to be disgruntled. "Your mother wouldn't mind," said Nina as a parting shot.

"No, you can bet your life that my mother would be tickled to death about it," replied Eric sourly.

"There you are then," concluded Mrs. Bradley. She was clutching hard at the strap, for she had lately had frequent fits of giddiness. It must have had something to do with the pains in her side. Every now and then, parcels, labels and hands swam in front of her eyes, and she thought she was going to topple over. But you didn't talk about things of that sort if you wanted to keep your job at the Central Stores. "There you are then," she repeated, and swayed wearily to and fro. Lilian stood close by and said nothing. She was seething with anger and jealousy at the thought that she had been turned down and Nina was being put into the shop-window. At the thought, too, that Nina was married, while she had to go back evening after evening all alone to the dump where she lived, and that Eric, the silly mutt, acted as if Nina were too

good to display herself. All these things exasperated her like a throbbing pain.

"It would be a much bigger wow if the folks knew that they were having a peek at the knees of Countess Bengtson," she said. That made Eric squirm, as she could see for herself, but that was cold comfort. The three others changed at 42nd Street, and she rode on by herself as far as 125th Street.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Nina looked forward with any pleasure to showing herself in the shop-window. On the contrary, she felt rather scared about it. 'Seventy dollars,' she thought, while she played rummy with Skimpy, 'seventy dollars.'

Eric was still not quite reconciled to the idea, but he let her have her way. Nina was already picturing to herself the two of them choosing the small Ford. She could not get to sleep. She lay there in the dark, feeling nervous about the task which faced her, and building castles in the air.

"Then you won't feel bored any more," she said, a good while later. She could hear from Eric's breathing that he, too, was not yet asleep.

"When?" he asked.

Nina stretched out her hand towards the other bed.

"Afterwards—if we—for instance, if we had a small Ford. Then we could drive somewhere in the evenings."

The other bed seemed to be thinking this over. She was still holding out her hand towards him, but probably he had not noticed it.

"But I don't feel bored," said Eric presently.

"Yes, you do," murmured Nina. "I know—you don't need to mention it. Playing rummy every evening with Skimpy and old man Philipp—of course, you must find that pretty tame. But you wait a bit——"

She broke off, and then Eric's hand stole from the other bed towards her hand. "Cute *lille Spurv*, we've been married only three weeks and already you're worried about me."

Nina wanted to contradict him, but decided not to. Eric always caught her out if she told a fib. Yes, she *was* worried about him. He was strange and absent-minded and reserved, and each evening he was becoming more off-hand about the games of rummy and the life in the Bradley home. What he needed was a car—fresh air—excitement—speed——

"It's only that I don't care for chocolate kisses," said Eric from the other bed.

Nina laughed softly, and soon after that they fell asleep.

The next day Nina received her training for the shop-window, and the following night Eric did not come home. They had dinner together at Rivoldi's, and then he went back to the shop to

decorate the window in which the garters were to be displayed.

Nina started her shop-window duties on a Wednesday. Wearing a light blue linen dress, she stood among the sixteen smirking wax figures and demonstrated the Fidelia patent garter. She was wondering all the time whether her stocking would really stand the strain. Three times in the course of the morning Eric came out into the street, and marched up and down for the purpose of inspecting his wife in the shop-window. She no more ventured to smile at him than if she had been an actress in a Shakespearian tragedy. At noon she had half an hour's rest. She turned her back upon the sixteen wax figures, and met Eric in the canteen. He made no reference to the job that she was doing without his approval, and she did not mention it either. Lilian came in, but she did not join them as of old. At Staircase 5 they separated, and Nina went back to the shop-window.

It was a tiring job, dreadfully tiring, and irritating too. But after two days she got used to it. Sometimes she felt as if she herself had turned into a wax figure with a stiff bend in her back and a wooden smile.

The people of New York are supposed to have no leisure. But when a pretty girl stands in a shop-window and uses her legs to demonstrate that her stockings don't tear, then all the hustlers in

New York manage to find plenty of leisure. From early in the morning until evening there was such a crowd at the north wing that a policeman had to stand there and keep order. Many people waited about for quite five minutes at a time and looked on with an expectant smile as if they were hoping to see a good joke reach its climax. Even the beggar whose beat was at the next corner and who wore a notice, "I am blind," got his dog to guide him across and risked a peep at Nina. After a while she entirely forgot that she was being stared at. She did her job to the best of her ability and did not worry her head about the people outside.

"You'd never have been any use as a mannequin," said Lilian in the evening, when they knocked off, tired and wilting.

"No, that I wouldn't," said Nina complacently. Eric had to stay in the shop once more. The conference on the summer campaign was not nearly over.

"Say, I don't believe you realize what a break it is for you to be displayed like that," said Lilian.

"How do you mean?" asked Nina. Her back ached.

"Why, with all those people seeing you, just think of the chances you'll have. It's a cinch you'll make good."

"Make good how?" asked Nina. She was looking forward to the seventy dollars and the

small Ford. But making good was something beyond that.

"You're a dumb cluck," said Lilian. They were powdering their faces in the ladies' cloakroom. Nina was doing it very sketchily, but Lilian was thoroughly intent upon the task.

"Don't you get any proposals? Love-letters and such?" she asked.

"I'm a married woman," replied Nina. Lilian looked at her with a critical, searching, contemptuous glance.

"*I* ought to be doing that job," she said. The remark had all kinds of implications. Envy, jealousy, ambition, resentment, even hatred and contempt for pretty little simple-minded Nina. It was a galling remark which did a lot of mischief: *I* ought to be doing that job.

X

IT is a curious fact that people who live in a big city are rarely acquainted with more than a tiny section of it. They always see the same streets at the same hours and under the same conditions of lighting. Steve Thorpe, for example, was familiar only with the way from his home in White Plains to his office on Fifth Avenue, and from there to his club a couple of blocks farther on—and he knew even that section only from the window of his car.

It was a pure chance which brought him past the north wing of the Central Stores one Friday morning shortly after twelve, and this was due to a letter which he had received. This letter, the wording of which was both muddled and solemn, bore the signature Philipp Philipp, and Thorpe would not have paid any further attention to it if the tangled sentences had not mentioned his wife so many times. The writer, Philipp Philipp, apologized for the lack of respect which, through a misunderstanding, he had shown for Mrs. Thorpe. While reproaching himself, he also expressed the earnest wish that Mr. Thorpe might help him. "Through your wife I have lost the occupation

which all my life I performed to the best of my abilities. Please, Mr. Thorpe, show your generosity, and help me to recover this occupation. I know that you are a friend of Mr. Crosby. A word from you can restore my happiness to me," concluded the complicated document.

From it Mr. Thorpe inferred that this Philipp Philipp was not aware that his wife had started divorce proceedings against him. He was grateful to him on that account, for since he and his wife had separated, he had been going about with the feeling that the whole town was pointing at him. Although Lucy was entirely to blame, he had a bad conscience. In many divorce cases he had adopted the attitude that the husband was always to blame if his wife kicked over the traces. If the letter had not mentioned his wife, he would have flung it away immediately. But Steve Thorpe felt an unswerving attachment to the woman who had thrown him over, and everything connected with her roused his feelings tremendously. He had withdrawn to his home and seen nobody, and the people who came to his office were too tactful to talk about Lucy. Actually, he had assumed that she had left for Europe long ago, as she had announced her intention of doing when they had separated. It was not until he had received this letter that he discovered that she was still in New York. Philipp Philipp was either a lunatic or a windbag. The letter was a puzzle to

Thorpe, but he got all worked up when he reminded himself that some unknown person had apparently been insulting Lucy. He picked up the receiver for the purpose of telephoning to Crosby, whom he knew at the club. But he put the receiver down again when he saw the officious look on the face of his woman secretary. Miss Tackle had the appearance and the vigilant qualities of those stone dogs which stand at the gates of the temples in China to frighten away evil spirits. He felt small in front of her, the telephone girl and the office boy. He rose and walked to the window. The sun was shining. The Central Stores were only three blocks away. The big clock on the central tower sparkled, and immediately afterwards struck twelve. For years Thorpe had been accustomed to time himself by this clock. "I'm lunching out," he muttered, took his hat but not his overcoat, and withdrew from the startled gaze of Miss Tackle.

When he reached the street he took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. He waited impatiently for the green light which would enable him to cross the street in safety, for like all people who never walk he was afraid of being run over. The sun warmed his back, and there was a smell of carnations at the next corner. A woman was selling flowers, a man was pushing a popcorn barrow along. Thorpe found it quite pleasant to drift forward with the stream of pedestrians. 'I ought

to walk much more than I do,' he thought to himself. 'One round of golf on Saturdays isn't enough.'

Thorpe was a large, heavy man of fifty-two. For the last four years he had been quite bald, and lately his blood-pressure was not what it ought to have been. The machine was wearing out, he sometimes complained. He was a worker of amazing perseverance and concentration. He had earned plenty of money and had let his wife have all the luxury that she could ask for. He was one of the millions of American husbands who spend so much time earning money for their wives that they have no time left for them. Now she had left him. Or as he put it, she had run away with a gigolo. The fact that the name of the gigolo was Conte di Peruggi and that Lucy wanted to marry him did not change the situation in the least.

Steve Thorpe was at the age when a man feels terribly hurt and upset if his wife leaves him for a gigolo. But, on the other hand, she was at the age when women are apt to run away with gigolos. It is the eleventh-hour scramble, the desire to have one last fling before it is too late. Sometimes he was in a rage with Lucy and sometimes he was very sorry for her. The law-suits in which he had acted for clients of his had made him too familiar with many such details to be uncompromising. And so he was now on his way to hear whatever

news about his wife this fellow Philipp might be able to tell him.

He reached the Central Stores, stopped in front of the window displays, and had a look at everything. This was new to him, and it helped to distract his mind from the enclosed circle in which his brooding thoughts constantly eddied. He elbowed his way onwards in the crowd, turned the corner, strolled past the north wing until he came to the window in which the Fidelia patent garter was being demonstrated.

Thorpe stopped and began to smile. 'Pretty,' he thought. 'Very pretty. Very cute.'

Each of the sixteen wax figures had a small price-ticket dangling from its knee. Price $0.80. The girl who stood in the middle of the window lifted her skirt at regular intervals and dragged at the garter—she also had a price-ticket dangling from *her* knee.

'Lovely,' thought Thorpe, looking at Nina and the wax figures. 'The girl's a peach, much prettier than she looks at first sight.' He stood for a while and gazed, then he strolled on. After a while he came back to the window—in the meantime he had walked all round the block, the sun was shining and the walk did him good.

'That's what I ought to get hold of—a girl-friend,' he thought. It was the panacea of all the divorced husbands whom he knew. A girl-friend, someone to go about with, someone who

could lend a little warmth and the semblance of youth.

At bottom, Thorpe was a good sort. He was fond of dogs and children, of anything, in fact, that was small and needed protection. What he would really have liked was to be endearing, but that was outside the scope of his accomplishments. At home in White Plains he had two dogs. Of course, the house was too big for a man living alone, and the wireless set and a bottle of whisky formed an imperfect substitute for company. He stood there for about five minutes longer, looked at the girl and then stepped into the store by the north entrance.

The information-desk was occupied by a grey-haired lady who looked as if she were a member of many reform leagues. Thorpe, feeling suddenly very breezy, went up to her.

"I want to buy the girl who's displayed in your window," he said and took off his hat.

"I beg your pardon," said the lady in the information-desk.

"The girl in the shop-window. She's marked eighty cents. I consider that a bargain. Where can I obtain her?"

"Ah, you're having a joke, I see," said the information lady, much relieved. "What can I do for you?"

Thorpe's high spirits had now passed away. He remembered why he was there. "I'd like to

speak to a man of the name of Philipp," he said. "Do you know whether he's employed here?"

"Philipp? The detective? One moment, please," said the information lady.

She did some telephoning, with the result that after a while a tall, broad-shouldered young man, looking like a champion footballer, made his appearance. The information lady eyed him with obvious approval and introduced him as Mr. Cromwell.

"This gentleman wants to speak to Mr. Philipp," she said. "This is Mr. Cromwell. He'll give you the information you require."

"My name is Thorpe," said the attorney. "I've had a letter from a certain Mr. Philipp and I'd like to have a word with him about it."

"Philipp is in the fur repository at the moment, Mr. Thorpe. I am the new house detective, if it's anything that——"

"No, nothing of that kind," said Thorpe hurriedly. "If you'll kindly show me the way to the fur repository——"

Cromwell laughed, as much as to say: Not on your life, brother.

"Nobody's allowed into the fur store-room," he said with a pitying smile.

"Well, maybe you can fetch Mr. Philipp here, then," suggested Thorpe. Cromwell took careful stock of him.

"Maybe it's about a job for old man Philipp," the information lady interposed hesitantly.

The new detective twinkled towards her. "Is it about a new job?" he asked.

Thorpe now lost his patience. "Can I see him or can't I?" he retorted.

"Not for another half-hour. But if you don't mind waiting till he's been on his rounds down below."

"Thanks all the same. It's not so important as all that," said Thorpe, angrily putting on his hat again and departing. He felt an awful fool for having given himself so much trouble on account of the silly rigmarole in the letter. Oddly enough, it suddenly seemed to him that he didn't care two hoots what his former wife did. If she was offended, it served her right. The short walk in the April sun had thoroughly refreshed him. It may also have been the sight of the girl in the shop-window. He had to admit to himself that he was eager for another look at her.

But when Steve Thorpe got back into the street, the window was empty. Or rather, it was filled with sixteen smirking wax figures, but it seemed empty to him, because the girl was no longer there. He brooded a little over this state of affairs, lingered a moment, made up his mind, walked all the way round the Central Stores till he came to the south entrance and stepped in from that side.

Here was the perfumery department which reeked of lily of the valley soap, and he felt ill at ease in this atmosphere of female toilet articles. But here, too, he discovered an information-desk, presided over by a middle-aged lady who looked enormously efficient.

"Pardon me," said Thorpe, "but could you tell me who took the girl out of her window?"

This information lady was quicker on the uptake, and at once began to smile. "The girl is probably having her midday rest," she said with a glance at her wrist-watch.

"Can you tell me her name and where I can speak to her?"

The smile on the face of the information lady froze. "Pardon me, sir, but it's strictly forbidden for us to give information of that kind," she said icily. 'These women of forty are the very deuce,' was Thorpe's private reflection as he left the store.

If Steve Thorpe had seen Nina again that morning, it is probable that his passing fancy would have faded away. But because he did not see her once more, he was left with a strange sense of unrest, an expectant and unsettled feeling. It was a long time since he had felt so much alive as he did now, with this slight tingle of discontent in his veins. It was like a part of the April day, dispensing warm sunshine blended with a dash of coolness in the air which seemed to come from some distant mountain-range.

As it was midday, crowds of young people from offices and shops were standing about in the streets and smoking cigarettes. Thorpe steered his way attentively among them. He was looking for the girl from the shop-window. At the next corner was a big drug-store full of people who were taking a snack. Suddenly Thorpe had an idea, which amounted almost to a certainty, that the girl must be in there. He entered, hoisted himself on to the nearest stool which had just been vacated, and ordered a ham sandwich. It was many years since the attorney had given up lunching in drug-stores. The years of his success, the years of his unhappy marriage, the years during which he had gone bald and become paunchy. Among the young people he suddenly felt young again, whisked back to the time when he had been a novice.

There was no sign of the girl, although a regular bevy of flappers sat munching at the counter. The attorney inspected each of them in turn. Not one of them appealed to him half as much as the girl in the window. He got up, astonished at himself, paid and went back to his office on Fifth Avenue.

Quite a number of people were already waiting for him there, and he kept his nose to the grindstone until late in the afternoon. At five o'clock he had finished a tiring conference, and asked Miss Tackle to make him some coffee. The gurgle of the electric percolator and the pungent but delicate

aroma of the coffee filled the room and made it very snug. "Get me Mr. Crosby at the Central Stores," he said, so suddenly that it came as a surprise to himself. He did not know what made him feel so inclined to go off the deep end. He didn't care two hoots whether Miss Tackle listened, and whether she approved of his aims or not.

Between the office and the store there was the usual cluster of underlings to cope with before Miss Tackle managed to push her way upwards to the man at the top. "Mr. Crosby on the line," she at last announced triumphantly and handed Thorpe the receiver. He cast a swift glance at her and she went out, a pattern of discretion. He knew that in any case she would listen in to his conversation from the other telephone in the front office.

"Is that you, Crosby? This is Thorpe speaking. Good day, how are you?"

"Good day, Thorpe, how's yourself?"

"Grand weather to-day."

"Is that so? I've had no time yet to see."

"And how's the percentage?"

For once in a way this did not refer to dividends from shares, but to the amount of sugar in Mr. Crosby's constitution. It was meant as a friendly enquiry, and it was taken in the same spirit.

"Thanks, only ·5 at the last examination."

"I'm glad to hear it. Maybe now you feel like doing a friend a favour or two."

"If it costs nothing."

"The first one concerns a fellow named Philipp Philipp," said Thorpe, and pulled the muddled letter closer to him, for he had forgotten the name again. "I hear that this man has lost his job through my wife. I'd like to put in a good word for him—I mean, I want to ask you to let him stop on. He seems to have worked for you for a good many years, and I don't like the idea that he should be fired on account of my wife."

Mr. Crosby said nothing for a while.

"Hallo," said Thorpe.

"Hallo, I haven't rung off," said Crosby, "I was only just thinking matters over. I'm sorry, Thorpe, but there's nothing doing. It doesn't concern your wife at all. The man's a heavy drinker, he's old, he simply isn't fit for his job any longer."

"Nothing doing?" asked Thorpe.

"I'm afraid not," was the answer.

"Well, anyway, I've done my best to help the man. Are you coming to the club to-morrow evening?"

"I don't think so. I'm feeling all in."

"That's the spring," said Thorpe, in whose veins a new unrest was tingling. "And by the way, I want to ask another favour. It won't bother you at all."

"Yes, what is it?" said Crosby in a gruff voice. The attorney's breezy manner jarred on him.

"You have a girl there standing in the shop-window—stockings or something of that sort—I'd like to have her name and address and so on—where can I get the information?"

Crosby laughed briefly. "Do you also need a saleswoman for stockings?" he asked.

Thorpe answered: "Yes, that's about it."

"Well, I wish you luck," said the telephone. "My secretary will get the information for you."

"Many thanks, Crosby. I'll be seeing you in the club."

Thorpe hummed a tune and proceeded to drink his coffee. Miss Tackle came back and tried to make it appear that she had heard nothing. Ten minutes later Mr. Crosby's secretary rang up and in dry, official tones stated that the name of the lady whom Mr. Thorpe had enquired about was Nina Bengtson. She was from Houston, Texas, her age was nineteen and she had been a saleswoman in the glass and china department for the last six months.

"Many thanks."

"Not at all, you're welcome."

Thorpe read over a sheaf of letters which Miss Tackle placed before him, signed them, took his hat and overcoat and left his office.

"Pleasant week-end, Miss Tackle," he said.

"Thanks, the same to you," replied Miss Tackle, and there was an unmistakable hint of tartness in her voice.

He felt strongly inclined to walk as far as the Central Stores again, but his chauffeur was waiting in front of the building with the car, and by the illuminated clock it was five minutes to six. He got in, told his chauffeur to drive to the Central Stores and left his car in the evening welter of people and lights. The store was just closing. When he reached the shop-window, an exceedingly blond young man was letting down the cream-coloured curtains which made it impossible to see anything from the street.

"Home, Tony," said Thorpe curtly as he got in.

At home he had a couple of dachshunds, Max and Moritz. On Sunday he could play golf, or call on his friend Dr. Back at Rye. He was grateful for anything which distracted his thoughts from his wife. The girl in the shop-window seemed to possess this capability in a high degree.

When Thorpe arrived in front of the store at lunch-time on the Monday, he could not find the window which had interested him so much. It took him a minute or two to realize that the scheme of decoration had been changed. The place where Nina Bengtson had stood was now occupied by a display of garden furniture painted in garish colours and full of summer allure. On the Tuesday and Wednesday Thorpe tried to forget the matter. 'What for?' he asked himself on the Thursday morning as he drove to his office. Deep down in him was embedded the

masculine desire to get his own back, to get his own back from his wife for the way she had treated him. He had been nearly always faithful to Lucy, mostly through lack of time and interest. He had a dark sort of feeling that this belated escapade might render him more attractive to his wife.

It may seem strange that Mrs. Thorpe, who made so unattractive an impression in the fashion department, could cause such heart-ache to so good a man as Thorpe. But human beings have as many facets as insects have eyes, and each individual is acquainted with only those surfaces of others which are directly visible to him. Thorpe knew Lucy, he was aware what she had been like, and the kind of woman she had become. The delicate and sheltered girl whom he had married, the young wife who had gone through the ordeal of three miscarriages and was then compelled to give up her desire to have children. The staunch helpmate which she had been when he was still struggling to make a living. The change had set in as soon as he had started making money. He now remembered how often she had begged of him to pay more attention to her.

"There'll be time enough later on for that," he had replied. "Life's passing by and we're missing everything," she said. He looked upon this as hysterical and unfair. He gave her furs,

jewellery, an emerald ring for her fortieth birthday. Instead of being delighted, she had wept. "You think that life means nothing but security and everlasting games of bridge," she had said. At the time he had felt surprised and annoyed. Now at last he began to understand. A brackish after-taste was all that was left to him of his bungled marriage.

'What for?' he again asked himself. 'Why shouldn't I enjoy a diversion if it comes my way?'

Towards noon he withdrew from the sphere of Miss Tackle's solicitous attention, and walked the three blocks to the Central Stores. The sun was not shining to-day, but the air was sultry beneath the clouds with which the sky was hidden. Thorpe took the lift to the sixth storey and wandered aimlessly through the china and glass department. A crabbed-looking female came forward to attend to him, but that was not what he wanted.

"Isn't Miss Bengtson here?" he asked, point-blank. The head floor-walker came up, and in muffled tones called out: "Nina, Nina, a customer for you." Thorpe was suddenly reminded of an absurd and painful episode in a house of ill-fame at New Orleans. Nina, a customer for you—to be sure. But when Nina made her appearance he became embarrassed and did not quite know what to say. "A friend of mine advised me to ask for you. What I want is a liqueur set—

Swedish glass——" he stammered. "Swedish glass——" said Nina pensively, and three creases showed themselves on her forehead. She had the face of a child and the body of a young woman. Her skin revealed an inner sheen and lustre, and radiated youth and health. Thorpe's heart began to glow as he followed her in the search for the liqueur glasses.

While she was attending to him, he tried to start a conversation, but it fell rather flat. He was out of practice and she seemed utterly intent upon her duties. Making a hard-boiled jury fall for sob-stuff was an easy job compared with finding the proper way to break the ice with a girl working in a store. With the idea of doing her a good turn, he bought a set of twelve expensive glasses and privately hoped that she made a commission on sales.

"This department is the very place for you," he said, as she tapped at each glass to make sure that it was free from cracks or flaws.

"Why?" she asked.

"If anyone tapped at you that way, there'd be the same kind of clear and delicate sound," said Thorpe. She blushed. "You mustn't say such things," she said with a smile of astonishment. She could not tell the customer that only her husband was now allowed to pass remarks of that kind. Thorpe dawdled a little longer, looked at some flower-vases and fruit-dishes, expressed his

approval of everything, promised to come back some time, and finally took his leave, for which purpose he removed his hat, thus bringing to Nina's notice his good manners as well as his bald head.

Nina had intended to tell Eric about the customer who had been so nice to her, but she did not get a chance. After closing-time she waited as usual at Staircase 5, but there were no signs of Eric. The store emptied, she heard the clatter of the employees on their way to the exit, and the ceaseless ping-ping-ping of the clocking-out apparatus in the yard of the old building. Then there was silence, the lifts had ceased working and the lights were being switched off. At last there were footsteps from above, but it turned out to be only Push, who handed her a letter and looked on inquisitively while she read it.

"*Darling lille Spurv*" [wrote Eric],

> "*I am tied up by a non-stop meeting, please don't wait for me, it would be no use. Go to a movie or find something else to amuse you for this evening. Don't bother about my supper, I'll go to Rivoldi's afterwards. Three hundred kisses in advance.*"

Eric had covered the margin with sketches of himself weeping, displaying a broken heart, and assassinating old Sprague with an upholsterer's

hammer. Nina could not help laughing although she did not feel very cheerful.

"Well, it can't be helped," she said, patted the youth's incredible head of hair, and went.

"My goodness," said Nina as she was about to step into the street from the staff exit. "Yes, it looks pretty bad, young lady," said Joe, the night-watchman, and he came and stood by her side. In the store the state of the weather passed almost unnoticed, although Nina had heard once or twice something that sounded like rain. But she was not prepared for the cloud-burst which was now in progress. There was not a soul in the street, and swollen streams of water raced along to the gully-holes. Huge drops spurted on to the asphalt and were split into myriads of tiny jets. Nina had neither raincoat nor umbrella. In dismay she gazed down at her trim dress. The four blocks to the subway would have involved it in havoc and disaster. She waited for a while, and several motor-buses, all overcrowded, rumbled past. As there was still not the slightest sign that the downpour was abating, she made up her mind to take a taxi to the station, and beckoned to one. But the taxi-men were uppish and sarcastic, as they always are when it is wet. They drove past, and merely splashed volleys of muddy rain-water towards Nina's legs.

At the very moment when she was about to stop trying, a private car came into view, and

pulled up just in front of the staff exit. The gentleman inside let down the window and said: "Can I give you a lift?"

Although an invitation of this kind is the most harmless and commonplace feature of life in New York, Nina answered as her mother in Houston, Texas, had taught her: "Thanks all the same, but I'm waiting for a bus."

"If you do that, you'll get wet through, Miss Bengtson," said the gentleman in the car, and now Nina observed that it was the customer who had been so nice to her that same afternoon. He popped his bald head out of the window, and smiled at her encouragingly. "Why, we're old acquaintances," he said. "I really don't know ——" said Nina doubtfully. It was cold, her right side was already soaking wet, and to walk through the rain as far as the subway seemed to be an undertaking of insuperable difficulty. What clinched the matter was that the gentleman left the shelter of his car, stepped bare-headed into the rain and held the door of the car open for her. "Get in—you mustn't be strait-laced in weather like this," he said, and Nina got in.

It was warm in the car, and the first thing that Nina noticed was a bunch of fresh lilies of the valley in a vase near the window. Their heavy, cloying fragrance seemed to envelop her. "Where shall we put you down?" asked Thorpe. "At the nearest subway station," said Nina.

"Whereabouts do you live?" asked Thorpe, and Nina told him her address. "Then it would be simpler if I dropped you at your apartment. I'm driving in that direction, anyhow," said Thorpe. The chauffeur manœuvred his way through the welter of cars, the rain pelted unceasingly on the roof and the lilies of the valley continued to shed their fragrance.

"It's very kind of you——" said Nina, and Thorpe replied: "Not at all, not at all."

Now that he had the girl so close to him he did not know how to make an approach to her. She looked winsome and guileless, and he felt that she would have to be treated cautiously. "Did you get wet?" he asked, and touched the shoulder of her dress. She at once backed into her corner.

"No, I'm all right, thanks." Nothing more was said till they reached Central Park, and the silence became dense and oppressive. "Where are the lovely glasses that you bought?" asked Nina. Thorpe had left the liqueur set in his office. "In my office," he said, "I'm an attorney. My name is Steve Thorpe." Nina made a sort of little bow. The car proceeded through 72nd Street and towards Riverside Drive. It was now raining steadily in torrents, and the asphalt was a lake filled with lights. "Do you really want to go home?" asked Thorpe. "Where else should I go?" replied Nina in astonishment.

"There are plenty of pleasanter things to do on a wet evening. A night-club, the movies, a concert. Or is somebody waiting for you?"

When Thorpe asked this question, Nina suddenly felt unhappy. This was her fourth evening without Eric. "Nobody's waiting for me," she said briefly. "Then we're in the same boat," rejoined Thorpe. She stole a side-glance at him. He seemed to her very old with his bald head and the deep lines of worry round his mouth.

"In a big city like this there are lots of lonely people," she said, in spite of herself. Thorpe expressed his agreement feelingly, and so one word led to another until they entered the garden suburb of Fieldston.

"You see, I've brought you home safely," said Thorpe. "But it's a shame. Now you're going to sit moping at home, and I can't tell you how blue I shall be. Let's have a meal together and then go to the movies."

Like millions of other American girls, Nina was crazy about Gary Cooper, more especially as it always seemed to her that there was a resemblance between Gary and Eric. Eric was just as tall and slender, and he also had two furrows down his cheeks. And he was apt to assume a haughty expression when he thought that nobody was looking at him.

"I'm a Gary Cooper fan," she said artlessly. Thorpe misunderstood the rapt and dreamy ex-

pression that he glimpsed on her face in the light from a street-lamp as they had to wait at a crossing. He moved nearer to her and sought her hand. His shoulder pressed against hers. "That's settled, then," he said, rather uncertain of himself, "we're going to step out together." Nina shrank back. Then she at once began to laugh. She was putting him in his place, not so as to hurt his feelings, but quite plainly just the same.

"That's impossible, I'm afraid," she said. "I'm married."

"That doesn't matter," he retorted. "We're all more or less married—while it lasts."

Without intending to, he had lapsed into a resentful tone, and Nina noticed it. "I didn't want to offend you—you have been very kind to me," she said, and wondered whether she ought to get out.

"We're both married, and we're both alone this evening—that's not as it should be," said Thorpe. This remark went straight to the sensitive spot in Nina's heart, the place that hurt and upset her.

"My husband is on nightwork," she said hastily. Thorpe said nothing, but there was a sceptical look on his face. Suddenly, he himself did not quite know how it happened, he started speaking. "My dear girl," he said, "you're young, you still believe that marriage is something

sacred, something marvellous and all the rest of that Sunday-school hooey. Just look around you, and see whether there are any marriages that don't lead to separations or divorces, or run into some other snag. Marriage is a fine institution and we've hitched it on to this blessed civilization of ours. I could tell you how a marriage starts crumbling and then goes all to pieces, although the parties concerned meant well enough, goodness knows. I was once a young married man, and my wife was once just as cute and sweet as you are now. And I could also tell you how it all ended up—the marriage and my wife and everything."

Nina listened, but said nothing. She felt sorry for him, and sorry, too, that she had been hard on him at the outset. He went on talking, about his empty home, and the two dogs, and that he could not sleep, and how long the week-ends were, all by himself, and that he was looking around—not for anything wrong, only for a little company.

Steve Thorpe could make juries weep and drive a hard bargain with tough opponents, but beguiling a woman was not in his line. Otherwise he would have been careful to keep his marriage dark, he would have promised Nina a diamond ring and a trip to Florida, and he would have tried to make her drunk. The fact that he did none of these things, and that every word he

uttered bore the stamp of truth, aroused Nina's confidence. They had already driven past Mrs. Bradley's house and Nina had not asked him to stop the car. She felt that it would have been a hopeless lack of tact on her part if she had interrupted the outpourings of a lonely man's heart, and said: "Many thanks. This is where I get out." The rain was giving over, and the lilies of the valley had begun to droop. When Thorpe had finished speaking, he took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He looked tired and unhappy. Nina gazed at him. "Well, shall we have a meal together then, and afterwards go to the movies?" she suddenly heard herself say. She was astonished at her own words. But her feelings were moved because someone had pleaded to her for help, and she could see for herself that a look of extreme pleasure lit up the attorney's face.

He told the chauffeur to turn round and drive back; they dined in a first-class and old-fashioned restaurant near Grant's Club, and afterwards they went to a movie theatre on Broadway, where there was a film featuring Gary Cooper. Thorpe's behaviour was unexceptional, and he was at his ease all the evening. To be happy is one thing, and to become aware that a toothache has almost given over is another. He felt as if the pangs of grief caused by the failure of his marriage had suddenly been allayed. It left him rather

weary, but his mind was buoyant and free from care.

When he invited Nina to a night-club afterwards, she thanked him but asked to be excused. Once more the car took them along Riverside Drive to Fieldston. "Would it hurt your hand very much if I held it?" he asked with a smile. And Nina, also with a smile, said that she didn't think it would. They rode back like that in silence. Nina was thinking of Eric and Gary Cooper, and he was thinking of nothing at all, not even of Lucy. He merely felt his own pulse throbbing gently against Nina's glove.

When Nina reached home, a surprise awaited her. Eric was already there. He was sitting in their room beneath one of the little monkeys, and he looked rather offended. "So you're here?" she said fatuously. "It rather seems like it," he replied, without looking up. He was playing a complicated game of patience. "I didn't expect you back before midnight," said Nina, and felt qualms about kissing him.

"I murdered Mr. Sprague and hid his corpse in the cellar, simply to make sure of getting home earlier, and then you're not here," he said. Now she could tell that he was not really angry. "Where have you been, woman?" he asked in the style of lurid melodrama. "At the movies—you said in your note that I was to go to the movies."

"Obedient spouse," he said and moved towards her. "Did you come back in a taxi? I heard a car outside."

"I was given a lift in a car—on account of the rain—by a lady——" she said. The first lie which she had ever told her husband slipped out quite painlessly—in fact, she scarcely noticed that she had lied. An hour later she had forgotten Mr. Thorpe, and she did not remember him again until she reached the Central Stores the next day, and Joe handed her a pot of lilies of the valley in bloom, together with a note: "Thanks for the pleasant evening. Hope to see you again soon." Nina felt terribly embarrassed. Eric was standing beside her, smelt at the lilies of the valley, looked at the note, looked at her. "It's from someone who saw me in the shop-window," she stammered.

"He must have a tender heart," said Eric, who seemed to be vastly amused. And nothing more was said about the matter.

XI

EVERY year in May the Central Stores hired one of the steamboats which are moored in the East River and equipped for amusement purposes, and a big ball was arranged. It was held when the moon was full and the weather fine, while the vessel sailed very, very slowly up the East River, past the sky-scrapers of Manhattan as far as the Ship Canal and back again, along the Hudson to the other side of the George Washington Bridge, and at last back again down town.

For weeks beforehand the store began to simmer with excitement, for this was a red-letter day in the lives of the staff. Full moon and May and fine weather. Music and dancing. Flirtations and betrothals, and that hope for something quite unexpected and marvellous which simple-minded folk cherish in the depths of their hearts.

Push, the apprentice, for example, forwarded thirty-five cents and an order form which he had cut out of a magazine, and in return he received a course in physical training with a guarantee that it would transform him into a regular Goliath in

six weeks. Besides this he used an ointment —money returned if not satisfied—for causing freckles to disappear as if by magic.

Madame Chalon had her toe-nails dyed dark-red—heaven alone knew what results she hoped that this would produce. Mr. Berg had planned to celebrate, on board the steamboat, his engagement to a young lady from Brooklyn, the daughter of a Jewish dentist. Unfortunately, the engagement was broken off previously, and Mr. Berg had to console himself as best he could with a saleswoman from the perfumery department. It was his principle never to start things of this kind on his own beat. Toughy, the new head detective, was assailed with requests for dances for a full month in advance. He had promised to oblige twelve different ladies, and as a preliminary measure he had notified old man Philipp that he would have to be on duty in the store that evening. And Mr. Crosby sat in his tower trying to think of an excuse for not attending the treat, for this ball was a highly democratic affair, and the bosses of the Central Stores were expected without fail. Eric took the seventy dollars which Nina gave him for his birthday, but instead of paying the first instalment on a car, he settled his debts and redeemed his tuxedo from the pawn-shop where it had long been lying low and causing interest to mount up ruinously. Nina was disappointed in one way, for she knew how keen he was on a

little car, but on the other hand, she felt proud that her husband did not want to be in debt and was the owner of a tuxedo. He had been three years without a job before he had given up his dreams of fame as a painter and had sold himself to the window-dressing studio of the Central Stores. Even then, he earned only sixteen dollars a week, for he was regarded as a novice and an untrained interloper. That was why he was still burdened with debts. But it should be added that he worked regular miracles with those seventy dollars, for in the end there was actually enough left over to buy Nina a frock which he himself chose—pale-blue with a touch of silver at the waist. Nina was proud about it but not quite happy. Eric had changed a little in the last few weeks. He was restless and absent-minded, and sketched dozens of rough designs on sheets of paper which he then tore up and threw away in a huff.

"Isn't your mother visiting New York again soon?" asked Nina.

"What do you want of my mother?" Eric retorted. "Nothing, nothing at all. I only thought——" she replied. She would have liked to consult the vivacious and unconventional countess as to how her gifted and peculiar son ought to be treated if he was to be made happy.

Just before the momentous evening it hap-

pened that Steve Thorpe invited Nina to cocktails in his home, officially, with her husband. His acquaintanceship with the girl had not been carried any further, but it had not been entirely broken off, either. When he felt in low spirits and his private worries began to haunt him, he would walk the three blocks as far as the Central Stores and make aimless purchases in the china and glass department. He had already accumulated in his office a collection of glasses and vases of all shapes and sizes, and Miss Drivot made pointed remarks about Nina's persistent customer. Now and then, too, he had shown Nina little courtesies. He had brought her two tickets for a concert which she had attended with Eric, but which had left her puzzled. There were also two gardenias for her buttonhole, and a book. Then he waited quite often for her with his car in front of the staff exit. If she came out with Eric, he would politely raise his hat and drive away. If she was alone, he would take her home, and once she had driven on with him as far as White Plains, had inspected his home from the outside, played with the dachshunds who had come scampering through the front garden, but had declined to enter. One evening she made a clean breast of it, and confessed to Eric the whole of the secret but quite innocent affair. He laughed heartily when he heard of it. "Nina, Nina, *lille Spurv*, you're a double-crossing young

vamp," he exclaimed. "Here you are, playing around with sugar daddies, while your husband has to work like a nigger. You've been corrupted by the wicked city, that's what's wrong with you."

Nina was disappointed. She had expected something different, jealousy, tears, and a reconciliation to wind up with. Still, he had at least called her *lille Spurv*. The pet name had fallen somewhat into disuse since they were married. And so it came about that Nina had introduced her husband to the attorney one evening at the staff exit, and the two men had exchanged a few civil words.

For three whole days New York had been sweltering hot, although it was only the beginning of May, and it was still broad daylight when the Central Stores closed. Thorpe shook hands with Eric and invited them both to cocktails in his home on the following Wednesday. He would fetch them from the Central Stores and take them home afterwards. Eric accepted effusively. "He's a charming old boy," he said to Nina afterwards. "You've got hold of something really first-rate there." Nina was young and she hailed from Houston, Texas. She could not understand Count Bengtson's casual attitude, which was the product of the languor and mellowness and worldly wisdom of an old lineage.

But on the Wednesday Eric was quite unable

to get away. Instructions had been received from above that the stock of art goods was to be cleared, as this section would be discontinued. Mr. Sprague and Eric were accordingly faced with the task of displaying all the ghastly knick-knacks, the oleographs and the bronze statuettes tastefully and temptingly in the shop-window. The old man was on the verge of tears.

"I am in a spot," said Nina in the ladies' cloak-room to Lilian who was putting herself to rights. "Now Eric can't come and Steve Thorpe's waiting outside for us?"

"Who's waiting?" asked Lilian, and put her lipstick down.

"The old gent who's fallen for me, you know. I told you about him."

"What's his name, did you say?"

"Thorpe. Steve Thorpe."

"Is that the husband of our customer?"

"I don't know. But his wife's just getting a divorce from him."

"I'd like to make his acquaintance."

"You can do that right now," replied Nina.

Five minutes later they were both riding in Thorpe's car to White Plains. Lilian was cheerful and talkative. Nina was quiet, and Thorpe sat a little awkwardly between the two girls, while the car rapidly filled with Lilian's scent.

It is hard to say why Lilian was so anxious to make the acquaintance of Steve Thorpe. Prob-

ably she unconsciously wanted to make the acquaintance of the man who had bought that emerald ring which she had hidden away at home in her mattress. It was the instinct of a female, of a huntress, of a wanton. A man who had given rings to a woman like Mrs. Thorpe, and made overtures to a chit of a girl like Nina, ought to be easy prey. She still continued to writhe a little at the galling thought that Nina, and not she, had been chosen for the shop-window, that Nina, and not she, was married, that Nina, and not she, was being pursued by a wealthy man.

She would take the man away from Nina and get as many rings as she fancied, if she wanted to. While they were driving up Grand Concourse, she sized the man up: his age, his bald head, his paunch. He must be wealthy to make up for his shortcomings. She assessed his house, his domestic staff, his whisky. She had been reared in the slums, but she was born with the instinct for luxury. "Here's to good friendship," she said meaningly as she lifted her glass towards Steve. She was calling him plain Steve half an hour after she had met him. She switched on his wireless, sat and performed a few swaying dance steps, during which process she displayed the attractive lines of her hips, just as she did in the shop. Nina meanwhile was playing with Max and Moritz.

Thorpe sat down close to her in the corner. "What kind of a girl is that?" he asked.

"Lilian? She's the loveliest girl in the Central Stores," said Nina readily.

"I don't care for her," he said, and brought the conversation to an end.

At nine o'clock Nina began to yawn, just as Lilian declared that she felt thoroughly rested. Thorpe at once offered to take them both home. This time he drove himself, as he had sent his chauffeur away. He was an exceedingly slow and cautious driver. The whole time Lilian was considering which would be better tactics: to drive on alone with him or to get out with Nina. On no account must he discover that she lived at 122nd Street East. When she saw his face getting more and more drawn with fatigue each minute, she decided on getting out. "I suppose you can put me up somewhere or other," she said to Nina.

"Why, sure," Nina said with forced cordiality.

"Good night and thanks for the visit," said Thorpe, and he held Nina's hand tightly for an instant as she got out.

At the last moment Lilian had a magnificent idea. "Why shouldn't we invite Steve to our ball? It'll sure be a wow," she said.

"I don't know whether Mr. Thorpe cares for that sort of thing," said Nina doubtfully. The attorney enquired about the details of the Central

Stores Club Ball and asserted wholeheartedly that there was nothing he'd like better than to go there. The luckless Steve Thorpe was clutching at anything that took his mind off his wife and brought him closer to Nina.

"That's a date, then," said Lilian. "You'll be my beau and we'll make all the others look small." Making others look small—that was Lilian all over. When they got inside the house, it smelt of moth-balls. Mrs. Bradley was busy bringing up to date a black evening frock which was a relic of the days when she was better off. Skimpy sat beside her all of a flutter and removed the trimmings. Nina fetched her blue-silver frock from the wardrobe to show to Lilian, as well as the tuxedo which Eric had redeemed from the pawn-shop and of which Nina was quite proud.

Eric was working in the basement where the wax figures were kept. It was a week before the ball on the steamboat. He had set up five wax figures and was arranging them in nonchalant and elegant postures, just as he intended to install them in the shop-window later on. Lilian came in followed by Push who was carrying a pile of summer frocks. "We don't need you any more, Push," said Lilian when he had deposited the frocks on the floor.

In the room where the wax figures were stored it was always evening. The electric lights

were kept burning and the air, which descended through shafts, tasted like the subway. "I've brought the frocks for Window 12," said Lilian, and planted herself in front of Eric. "I'm greatly honoured," he said, took one of the frocks and held the flimsy fabric up in front of him to scrutinize it. The wax figures all stood around and smiled vaguely into the distance. "I wanted to speak to you alone," said Lilian. Eric looked up quickly. There was something hovering in the air between him and Lilian, an undefinable tension. He laid the frock aside and sat down on the edge of a table. "Where do you go when you want to pawn something?" asked Lilian. Eric began to laugh. "Do you mean to say that you've never taken anything to the pawnbroker's?" he exclaimed. "No," said Lilian curtly. "It's my first try. I must have a proper frock for the dance."

"I've always tried my luck on Sixth Avenue, but I hear that Second Avenue's a better place," said Eric. "If you like, I'll take you along when we close. The pawnbrokers keep open till seven."

"Thanks," said Lilian. She jotted down a few names and addresses, and then left. "The first dance is mine," he shouted after her, and returned to his wax figures. Sometimes he was so bored by window-dressing that he could have screamed.

So it happened that on the next evening Lilian strolled through Sixth Avenue, dawdling but very wide-awake.

She walked up and down three times before she ventured into a shop. She knew the address by heart. It was a dangerous game and she knew it. She felt rather shaky. But danger tempted her. She was made that way.

She sniffed at the air in the shop. It smelt of garments that had had plenty of wear. There was a motley litter of objects, and everything looked blurred and dim.

The man squeezed a magnifying-glass into his eye and examined the ring. It was very quiet. The ticking of the clock made quite a noise.

"What do you want for it?" asked the man. Lilian's heart beat so loud that she could hear it. "I don't know what the ring's worth. It was a present," she said. The man kept his eye on the stone. "I can give you six hundred," he said after a long silence. Lilian was taken aback by so large an amount. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely.

"A fine emerald," said the man. For a moment Lilian expected to see policemen loom up from the dim recesses of the shop and arrest her.

"I only want to part with it for a short time," she gasped. The pawnbroker now removed the magnifying-glass from his eye and looked at her.

"Your name and address, please," he said. "What for——?" asked Lilian.

"We must have your particulars—that's the law," said the man. "Something or other—a passport—or have you got an identity-card?"

Lilian had an identity-card, every employee of the Central Stores had a blue card in a transparent cellophane wrapper. She became aware of the identity-card in her bag as if it were something hot that she could feel through the leather. "Can't you do without that?" she asked.

"Sorry, that's impossible," said the man. Lilian smiled, and the tricks which she had learnt at the mannequin school stood her in good stead. "I'll hurry home and fetch my card," she said. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"If you make it snappy I'll keep the shop open a bit longer," said the pawnbroker, and handed the ring back to her. He handed back the ring. He had no suspicions. No policeman followed Lilian as she hurried to the nearest L—— station. She almost hated the ring at this moment.

She had now become obsessed by the idea that she must get rid of the ring which was no use to her. She must buy new frocks, she must be the loveliest girl at the dance. It was an opportunity of being noticed, the bosses of the Central Stores emerged from their concealment and mingled with ordinary mortals. Lilian could get no sleep, and her cheek-bones, hectic and

prominent, became even more conspicuous as her face grew thinner.

Three days before the dance she made her way to Second Avenue. She walked down the street, peered into the pawnshops, and at last, with an almost violent determination, stepped into one.

Here a woman was in charge. She was old and raddled with rust-coloured hair. Once more the magnifying-glass, the stale smell of cast-off garments, the litter, the tense stillness.

Two men were leaning against the counter. They eyed Lilian narrowly as if she were for sale.

"Well," said the woman presently, "three hundred, seeing that it's you. Where did you get the ring from?"

"It was a present," said Lilian.

"You sure know your onions if the boy-friend gives you presents like that," said the woman. "Nobody gives me any presents."

Lilian put on a sardonic smirk.

"Can I give you a lift, lady?" asked one of the men. He was big and had thick, chapped lips.

"Thanks, I'll take a taxi," said Lilian. The woman had meanwhile produced a slip of paper.

"Your particulars?" asked the woman casually.

"Oh," said Lilian, "I never thought of that. I've nothing with me."

"Nothing at all? Have a look in your bag," suggested the woman. Lilian laid her bag on

the counter and emptied it out. "There's a letter," said the pawnshop woman. The two men had come closer and looked on.

"Yes," said Lilian. "Will that do?"

"We're not so particular—it don't matter much, anyway," said the woman. She read the address and copied it into a book: Mrs. Adrianne Chalon, City Apartments, 367 West 72nd Street. "French?" asked the woman. Lilian now noticed that she squinted a little.

"French parentage—my father came from Canada," said Lilian. She had fished this letter to the detested directrice out of the waste-paper basket. When all the formalities were over and she thrust the three hundred dollars into her pocket, she felt ill at ease.

"I'll soon fetch the ring back," she gasped.

"Ten per cent interest, payable every month," said the woman. "Have a cigarette?" asked the other man. He was big and young, and would have been good-looking, if his mouth had not been so coarse. Although Lilian was craving for a smoke, she declined the offer. "Thanks all the same," she said. Ting-a-ling went the shop door-bell as she made her way out.

"Swell-looking girl," said one of the men, when she had gone. "We could just do with her," said the other. He was the shorter of the two, and looked like a Greek or an Armenian fruit-seller.

"I'd like to know how a floozy like her came by such a bang-up emerald," said the pawnshop woman and peered through the magnifying-glass.

"Ain't it on the list?" asked the good-looking man. The woman scanned a few pages of smudgy print. It was the police circular of stolen objects and a warning not to come into possession of them. "No, it's not there," said the woman presently.

"I wonder where she got the ring from," said the shorter of the men; the other whistled a sentimental tune.

"Better get a line on her," he said suddenly. He took his hands out of his trouser's pockets and proceeded to shadow Lilian.

XII

THE moon shone, the weather was fine, and there was dancing on the small deck. The band, although it consisted of only four musicians, gave a first-rate performance, and that was because they included two Cubans and a Russian. The Cubans provided the rhythm and the Russian the sentimental part of it. Mr. Crosby had actually turned up, and in tails too. He sat down below in what was called the saloon, where the Central Stores Club had rigged up a sort of throne for him. He was drinking black coffee in which he had cautiously dissolved two saccharine tablets. Each time he took a sip, he shuddered with disgust. Steve Thorpe had also come. He wore a grey-flannel suit, for he had not realized how seriously the staff of the Central Stores took their dance. He had brought gardenias for Nina and Lilian, and as Nina had already been presented with two gardenias by Eric, her corsage was smothered in flowers. Eric wore a tuxedo, with a dark red carnation in his buttonhole. Nina had a vague impression that he looked as if he had just left the dinner-table of the King of Denmark. It must be added

that she was not certain whether Denmark had a king or not.

Eric danced with Lilian and then with Nina, and then with Lilian again. He danced marvellously well, with elegance and restraint, and Nina felt very clumsy beside him. Her steps were still those which she had brought with her from Houston, Texas, where her father had sometimes taken her with him to entertainments. She sat down on a deck-chair by the bulwark and looked on. Eric danced more often with Lilian because, after all, he was married to Nina.

Lilian, who was wearing a white frock, looked lovely. It was a plain frock with the simplest possible lines. A frock so select and expensive that it certainly could not be bought in the fashion department of the Central Stores. Madame Chalon, who was swathed rather unwisely in a brick-red arrangement, fingered the material when nobody was looking. "What I always say is, a person must know how to *wear* clothes," she said to Lilian. "Thirty-nine fifty?"

"A hundred and sixty-five," replied Lilian, and glided away on the arm of the staff superintendent. Madame Chalon was left gasping at this for the better part of an hour.

"What would you like to drink, Nina?" asked Thorpe.

"I don't mind what it is, but it mustn't be anything strong, or I shall fall asleep at once," said

Nina. Thorpe gazed at her. She did not look sleepy, but more like a very alert child who had been sitting up too late. Her glances followed Eric everywhere, right round the deck. "Shall we dance? I'm not much of a dancer," said Thorpe. "Nor am I," replied Nina. Away they went, round and round the deck. Nina's hair was fragrant with youth, although she had put no perfume on it. Thorpe pressed her a little closer towards him. "It's fine here," he said.

When the musical quartet struck up a tango, everyone rushed away, to their chairs, or to the bar which had been set up for the occasion. Only a few simple-minded and utterly hopeless couples went on stumbling through their fox-trot, and could not understand why they were out of step. "Tango," cried Eric, "who can dance the tango?" He seemed to be in very high spirits and thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Don't drink too much, darling," Nina whispered to him, when he was sitting by her side for a moment. "You needn't worry about me," he said huffily. Her remark seemed to cause him quite a lot of annoyance. "Who can dance the tango?" he shouted, using his cupped hands as a megaphone.

"Why are you shouting so loud, baby?" asked Lilian, who was close to him. He turned round quickly as he heard her call him baby. "Are you

muzzy too?" he asked. Lilian slipped into his arms for the tango; he pulled her head parallel to his, just like the famous pair of dancers at the Casino, and she at once followed his lead. As he laid his hand on her bare back, he could feel that she was trembling. "What's the matter, Lilian?" he whispered. The quivering of her body thrust itself towards him, thrust itself into him—he was powerless against it. "Nothing. Why? It's just that I'm happy this evening," she murmured. "Do you mean that?" he asked. They went on dancing. Nina sat by the bulwark with Thorpe beside her, and watched the tango. At first a few dancers had remained on the floor: Cromwell, the new detective, for instance, with a girl from the perfumery department. But little by little they all stopped and joined the spectators who were looking on at Lilian and Eric. "A lovely couple," said Mrs. Bradley in her simple-minded way to Mr. Berg. She was wearing the black silk frock that she had brought up to date and that had become altogether too wide for her.

"Shall we go down below for a little? It's geting cool here," suggested Thorpe as he watched Nina's face. "In a moment—when the tango's over—it looks so pretty, doesn't it?" she replied, without taking her eyes off Eric and Lilian. When the tango ended, the whole deck shouted and cheered. Lilian lifted the train of her frock

and vanished like an actress after a performance. "Now I'd like something to drink," said Nina to Steve Thorpe.

Mr. Crosby, in the bowels of the boat, was just endeavouring to take his leave and go home. With this object in view he wanted to have orders given for the boat to stop at the Ship Canal so that he could get off there. "A delightful evening," he said to the committee which had paraded in front of him. "But I'm a sick man—you must excuse me."

They begged and prayed of him to stay longer —he still had to crown the beauty queen, the most beautiful girl on board, who would also be the most beautiful girl in the Central Stores. He put on his overcoat and was escorted up to the deck where a hoarse-voiced steward was hanging numbered tickets on the girls and arranging them in a long line. Lilian was number seventeen, Nina was number four.

"Good evening, Mr. Crosby," said Mrs. Bradley, and drifted into the great man's range of vision. He rummaged in his memory. "I am Mrs. Bradley," she said. "Of course—pardon me—my eyesight's getting terrible. What brings you to our modest entertainment, Mrs. Bradley?" He had long since forgotten that he had given a job in the despatch department to the widow of a former fellow-clubman. Mrs. Bradley drifted on. She had no pain that evening, but she was

filled with a foreboding that the pain might start again at any instant.

"Hallo, Crosby," said Thorpe, who wore a paper cap on his bald head and held a little rattle in his hand.

"Good gracious—what are you doing here, Thorpe?" asked Mr. Crosby, for whom in the meanwhile a new throne had been rigged up. With a grunt and a sigh he sat down upon it while the band played "Dixie," and the girls wearing the numbered tickets began to march in a circle round the deck.

"I have some friends among the staff," said Thorpe. "Male or female?" asked Mr. Crosby. "Both," replied the attorney. His eyes were fixed on Nina, her neat figure, her bashful smile, her eyes which were moist as if with tears, and yet brimming with eagerness for the great treat which was yet to come.

"Have you ever stopped to reflect about this, Crosby?" said Thorpe. "You're the owner of a huge store chock-full of things for sale—and I guess you have plenty of worry selling them, eh? Just the same, there's something that can't be bought in the Central Stores." Crosby's glance followed the direction of Thorpe's eyes and lighted on Nina. He was rather puzzled. "Is that meant as a complaint?" he asked. Thorpe smiled vaguely. He suddenly bestirred himself and went round saying to everyone: "Vote for

number four. Isn't number four the most beautiful? It's a cinch, I'm voting for number four." The touch of silver on Nina's frock glistened when she breathed, and the gardenias were already beginning to fade in the warmth of the evening.

Although Thorpe's eloquence induced a few people to vote for Nina—for instance old Sprague who, incidentally, was as drunk as could be, Mr. Berg from her department, and by way of a climax, Mr. Crosby himself—Lilian was elected queen of the evening by an overwhelming majority. She showed no signs of surprise or embarrassment when the paper crown was placed upon her head. She shook hands with Mr. Crosby, and with her jaunty mannequin gait walked once round the deck to show herself off to everyone. The four musicians played a fanfare of sorts, and suddenly Eric caught hold of her and lifted her high up in the air so that everyone could see her.

Mr. Crosby went home—that is to say the boat stopped for a few minutes at the pier on 225th Street and then proceeded on its way. Mr. Thorpe remained on board. He felt rather anxious about Nina, who before his very eyes began to droop like the gardenias on her corsage. Every now and then Eric dashed up, shouted: "Having a good time, *lille Spurv*?" and then disappeared again in the whirl of the dancers. 'Don't be a fool,' the attorney said to himself.

'Now's your chance. The girl's a bit tight and her husband's busy elsewhere. You'll never have a better chance than this evening.' He had another dance with Nina. She looked a little wisp of a girl, but she clung heavily to him. He kissed her beneath a red Chinese lantern. She made no serious attempt to stop him. All she said was: "This is silly, Steve," and her voice sounded tired. "Have another drink," said Steve hopefully and took her along to the bar.

Eric and Lilian were standing under the stairway which led up to the small bridge. Entrance strictly prohibited. Nobody passed in that direction, and from there they could see the lights of Manhattan on the other side, and how the moon lay on the water and gave it a metallic look.

"What's happened to you, Lilian? You've become quite a different person," said Eric. Lilian laughed flippantly. "I've thrown my old frocks into the garbage-can, that's all. Then suddenly all of you begin to sit up and take notice," she said.

"All of you? Who's that?"

"You men."

"I prefer to be regarded as an individual," he said. This was beyond Lilian. He thrust his arm into hers. "Are you cold?" he asked.

"No, on the contrary, I'm feverish," said Lilian. This was true. For weeks past she had

continually had a bit of a temperature. Cold shivers down her spine and burning hot cheeks and hands. It was all connected with the ring and the dangerous, hidden effects which it had produced.

"Your fever is infectious," said Eric. He had been drinking, not a great deal, for he did not like cocktails, but enough to put him in the right mood. He now realized that he was sharing Lilian's throbbing unrest. And, ye gods, what a lovely girl she was!

"I feel as if I'd been stored away among the moth-balls for a hell of a time, and had been taken out to-day, given a good shaking and put into circulation again," he said.

"You talk too much, Eric," said Lilian. "There's no need for that."

"Isn't there?" he asked and looked at her.

"No, there isn't," she replied, so softly that he could scarcely hear what she said. For a moment they stood there, conscious of the eddies which surged between them. Then Lilian put her arm round Eric's neck and kissed him. It was a long, hungry, clinging kiss. The moon slipped behind a little cloud and then emerged again. Eric staggered a little when Lilian let go of him. She laughed softly. "What does that mean?" he asked. "Not a thing," she replied and withdrew from the recess. Admittance strictly prohibited. "Stay another moment," he said hoarsely.

Two shadows were cast on to the deck when the moon came out again.

"Nobody's allowed through here, Nina," said Steve Thorpe. "There are always notices like that in the nicest places," said Nina.

"Don't make communistic speeches," said Thorpe. They turned round and went down the nearest stairway leading to the bar. Flirting couples were squatting and lounging wherever they could. When they again reached the light from the Chinese lanterns, Thorpe noticed that Nina's lips were white. The thought passed like a flash through his mind that he had never noticed details of that sort when he was married to Lucy. But Lucy used to put rouge on her lips. He could not have said for the life of him whether Nina had spotted the two of them out there under the bridge, as he had done. "What do you think, Nina?" he asked sharply. "Shall we take a little trip together, for a week-end or a whole week?"

"Why do you come out with such a proposal at this particular moment?" she asked.

"You're right. I ought to have asked you long ago. Maybe I've more nerve this evening because I'm a bit tight. But you knew the whole time what I wanted of you, didn't you?" Nina made no reply. She looked so crestfallen and unhappy that he suddenly felt ashamed of his encroachment. "I'm a hard-boiled old-timer,

Nina," he said. "I've managed too many lawsuits, and I've seen too often the way opinions change—and—and circumstances or relationships—and I have a sort of feeling that one of these days you'll be able to get along with me. What I mean is—I've wanted for quite a time to tell you this. I mean, if a change occurred in your life, or—do you see what I mean? If you ever feel lonely—why—there's old Steve—all you have to do is to come to me. Will you promise me that?"

Nina eyed him closely while he was stammering all these remarks. She stared at the silk handkerchief with which he mopped his forehead and which then vanished back into his breast-pocket. There was the ghost of a smile round her white lips. "You talk to me as if I were half-witted," she said. "Of course I understand what you mean. If one of these days I'm no longer married—all right, I promise that I'll come to you. That's a bargain."

The band, which no doubt had been having an interval, started suddenly on a rumba, very loud and very quick, with the rattling of peas in dried pumpkins. Cromwell rushed past, shouting: "Where's the beauty queen? I want to dance with the beauty queen!"

"Shall we dance?" asked Thorpe, and plucked her by the arm.

"No, thanks," said Nina. She turned round

quickly. Lilian was coming down the stairway from the top deck, tenderly escorted by the self-confident detective.

"Where is Eric?" asked Nina with pale lips.

"How should I know?" replied Lilian, gathered up the train of her frock and danced off.

XIII

IN the night Nina started up out of a bad dream and stretched out her hand towards Eric. He was not there. It was like the continuation of the dream. In the dream she had also tried to find him and failed. But after a few moments she heard the noise of the shower in the dark bathroom. She sat up in bed and listened.

"What's the matter with you, Eric?" she asked softly, as he groped his way back to bed.

"Nothing. I can't sleep. It's too hot here," he said absently. The two windows were wide open and the first gleam of dawn lay in the air. Nina stretched out her hand, and when nothing happened she drew it back again into her own bed. For a long time she lay there with her eyes open and heard the first milk-carts rumbling through the streets. She did not know whether Eric had gone to sleep or not.

During the next few days he was very busy. The clearance sale of the art stock was still in progress, and the holiday season had to be ushered in with a great boost and alluring wax figures in tights. He was bemused and did not look well. Whether he was walking or standing still or sitting

down, he made rough sketches on pieces of paper which he then tore up and threw away. Once Nina rummaged in the waste-paper basket and put the torn pieces of paper together again. "What's the matter?" asked Eric, although she had not said a word.

"They all look like Lilian," said Nina, with the three creases on her forehead.

"Lilian? Don't be silly. They're simply mannequins. That's why they all look exactly alike," he said. Nina was still kneeling with the scraps of paper in front of her. She waited for him to come and lift her up. But he stood by the window and lit a cigarette. It was a Sunday and Eric was more restless than usual. In the room above they could hear old man Philipp pacing to and fro, to and fro, to and fro.

"I can't stand it any longer," said Eric. "I must go out for a walk."

He went off without hat or overcoat. He did not say: "Let's go out for a walk"; he went by himself and did not come home again until four hours later. Nina took all his pants out of the wall cupboard and carefully pressed them. She went down into the cellar, opened her trunk and took her old doll into her arms. After a while she went upstairs again and looked for Mrs. Bradley.

"Shall I cook the supper to-day, Mrs. Bradley?" she asked. Mrs. Bradley lay on the sofa and looked yellow in the face. She nodded her head

wearily. She was scared at the thought of Monday and of standing in the parcels despatch-room with the pain in her side.

In the evenings they played a dismal round of rummy. Nina, old man Philipp, Mrs. Bradley and Skimpy. The little girl nearly always won. She screamed with delight while the grown-ups smiled wearily. They all had worries of their own, their secret fears, and their thoughts wandered.

"Where's your young man all the time these days?" asked old man Philipp. Nina coloured up as if she were ashamed of something. "Mr. Sprague always keeps him. They change the windows twice a week now," she said.

"That's so," remarked old man Philipp. He was a sceptic by reason of his calling. Nina regarded the frequent changes of the window-dressing as a proof that Eric was not lying to her. When they were tired of playing rummy, she helped Skimpy to build houses that kept falling down. She used to lie awake till Eric reached home, at three, at four, at seven. But she did not speak a word, and kept her eyes shut when he bent down over her. Sometimes he imprinted a soft kiss on her face when he imagined that she was asleep. That was a great comfort to her, and Nina felt like shedding tears about it. He smelt strongly of cigarettes, and also of something else which Nina sniffed with a frown. Sweetish and

blatant and rather shameless. She clenched her teeth. Lilian's scent.

That went on for three weeks. There were many days when they met only in the canteen at the Central Stores. They still went sometimes to Rivoldi's for supper, and then Eric displayed a forced and hectic jollity. In the middle of it all he would retreat behind a haze of abstraction, begin to sketch on the marble table-top and rub everything out again with his thumb. "Why doesn't Lilian come and eat with us any more?" Nina asked him. He shrugged his shoulders. He tried to look as if he did not care one way or the other, but his expression was that of someone at the dentist's when the drilling machine unexpectedly touches the nerve. Nina accompanied him as far as the entrance to the Central Stores and then went home. She wrote a letter to Eric's mother. The Countess Bengtson, Mental Hospital, Lansdale, Conn. It was not an easy task, and when she had written the letter she tore it up again. She was alone. Before she married Eric she had never realized how much alone she was.

Midnight, two o'clock, three o'clock. She realized how long a night could be, waiting for someone she loved and who did not come. She got up, put on her bath-robe and crept into the front hall where the telephone was. As quietly as possible she rang up the Central Stores. She could stand it no longer, she must speak to Eric.

Joe, the night-watchman, answered the telephone: "Sorry to trouble you, Joe, but I want to speak to my husband, Mr. Bengtson. He'll be in the west wing. They're dressing the windows."

"Just a moment," said Joe's bass voice which made her feel easier in her mind. Nina waited. Her heart thumped against the bath-robe. She felt as if she were indulging in some illicit escapade. After a long time she heard a voice in the telephone, but it was not Eric's.

"Hallo, who's speaking?" she said.

"This is Donald Brooks," was the answer. "I should like to speak to Mr. Bengtson," said Nina, feeling nonplussed. At this moment a door opened upstairs, and old man Philipp became visible in the narrow slit of light from his door. "Is anything the matter?" he asked in a loud whisper. Nina, with the receiver at her ear, shook her head. "It's me, Push," said the telephone, dropping the genteel name which nobody knew. "Oh, Push," said Nina with a sigh of relief, "are you still busy dressing the windows?"

"Yes, we're still at it, ma'am," replied Push.

"Can I speak to my husband for a moment?" asked Nina.

Old man Philipp had meanwhile come downstairs and was standing close beside her. She made a sign to him with her head that she wanted to be left alone. Her heart had suddenly become buoyant and ecstatic. She would have to ask

Eric to forgive her, and she did not want old man Philipp to hear her doing this.

"They left about an hour and a half ago," said Push from the other end.

"Who's they?" asked Nina.

"Mr. Bengtson and the model," said Push. "Is there anything else?" he asked presently, when Nina said nothing.

"No, that's all, thanks. Do you think he's coming back?"

"It's just possible," said Push consolingly.

"Thanks, Mr. Brooks," said Nina. She had suddenly become so clear-headed and quick-witted that she had no difficulty in remembering the unfamiliar name, she could see through the darkness, she could distinguish each separate fibre in old man Philipp's dressing-gown, she could hear Skimpy breathing in the next room. In the front garden a bird was clearing its little throat in readiness for its first morning trill.

"Can I do anything for you? Is anything wrong?" asked the detective. Nina looked at him for a moment as if the question needed time to reach her. "No, thanks. Everything's all right," she said politely and hung up the receiver. Old man Philipp stared after her as she made her way through the dark passage back to her room.

Men can be deceived by women; women cannot be deceived. They are aware of everything, they can sense everything. Nina was aware of every-

thing. She did not make a scene when Eric came home. She lay dry-eyed on her bed and felt herself grow numb. There she lay like a small stone image. Shortly before that the alarm-clock had gone off. Seven o'clock. Eric came in, smoking a cigarette and behaving with a heartiness which did not ring true. His hair was much too smooth, as if he had just brushed it with water, to make a good impression.

"Good morning, *lille Spurv*," he said, and proceeded to kiss her on the forehead. She did not shrink away, but she had the feeling that her forehead must be hard and cold. As hard as stone. She had always been quiet and easy-going, but she could also be hard when something big was at stake.

"Good morning," she said and went out of the room. She knocked at Mrs. Bradley's door on the other side of the passage. "Mrs. Bradley," she said, "please tell them in the staff office that I can't come to-day."

"Are you sick?" asked Mrs. Bradley with great concern.

"I don't know. I feel feverish. It may be the 'flu."

"I expect that's what it is. I don't feel well myself," said Mrs. Bradley. "Don't you worry. You'll get three days' pay even if you can't go there."

"Yes, of course," said Nina, and went back to

her room. In the kitchen Skimpy was bustling about getting the breakfast before she trotted off to school. When Nina went in, Eric had already undressed and was standing under the shower. Nina sat down and waited.

"Won't you be late?" he asked as he came back from the bathroom. The water trickled from him and formed small pools on the floor. "I'm not going to-day," said Nina. He shot a quick, searching and frightened glance at her, then he lay down in his bed and pulled the counterpane over him. He seemed to be cold. By force of habit she smoothed out the counterpane.

"Where have you been all this time?" she asked.

"You know as well as I do, Nina."

"Yes, I know," she said.

Then followed a long, oppressive silence. "Come, come, don't make a scene," said Eric at last and caught Nina's hand. She did not snatch it away from him, but it was lifeless. "I won't make a scene," she said.

"I ought to have told you right away," he said, "but I wanted it to be a surprise. I'm painting a portrait of Lilian—it's for a competition."

"What competition?"

"Why, you know, for the summer poster."

Nina vaguely remembered having heard Eric talking at random about something of the kind.

"Wouldn't it be swell if I won the first prize and brought you home a thousand dollars?" he said,

and rubbed her hand to warm it. Nina tried to smile but it was not a success.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"I can't help it," he said, "Lilian makes me crazy. She's a hell of a vamp. But I need something of that sort now and then. Stimulus. It stirs me up a bit. After all, Nina, I'm a painter, even if I do stand in the window for old Sprague and make trees out of cellophane."

"You don't love me any more."

"I do, *lille Spurv*, I do."

"But you prefer Lilian."

"Lilian is different, Nina."

The worst of it was that he neither lied nor made any excuse. Nina waited for something which would ease the tension a little, and bring a little relief, but nothing of that sort came.

"It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't started painting her portrait. But it'll be a fine picture, Nina. I was all stale and washed up—I was never meant to be a paper-hanger. I was always alone with her at night in the studio, and being alone like that with Lilian—can't you understand?"

"No," said Nina.

"I only wish myself I hadn't fallen in love with her. But I have, and that's that. Still, it'll pass off."

Nina waited a little till she had managed to gulp down her distress and had some control over her voice.

"What's to become of us now?" she asked.

"Become of us? I don't know, if you don't."

"I can't go on living with you if you're in love with another woman," said Nina.

He sat up in bed.

"You don't mean that seriously?" he said.

"You can't change your nature, I can't change mine. I can't go on living with you."

"Nina," said Eric imploringly, "we've only been married six weeks."

That was the worst thing he could possibly have said. Married only six weeks and already he was letting his fancies stray. Nina felt the tears surging up within her.

"We're through," she said and went to the door. He turned his face towards the wall. She looked at his back. It was eight o'clock in the morning. Time to go to the store. 'I shall have to give up everything, everything,' thought Nina. 'There's nothing else for it.' In front of the window the bird was now singing in clear, mocking trills.

"If you could promise—to give up Lilian——" Nina whispered as she stood by the door. He did not turn round. He seemed to be thinking it over.

"Me give up Lilian? Good Lord—she won't give *me* up—she won't let go once she gets hold of something," he said, speaking to the wall. He

might just as well have taken a stick and hit Nina over the head with it.

"We're through, then." He shrugged his shoulders. She went out of the room and left him.

He continued to lie there for a while, with his face turned to the wall, so that she should not see how wretched he felt. Then the bird outside stopped singing. Footsteps could be heard on the porch and old man Philipp slammed the front door. So they were through.

"Don't leave me, *Spurv, lille Spurv*," he said to the empty room. But Nina was already kneeling in the cellar packing her trunk.

XIV

NINA, with one large trunk and a smaller one, arrived in the carpeted vestibule of Thorpe's home as if a gale had blown her there. It cannot be said that her entry was of a triumphal character. At first the servants did not want to let her in, and when she did get inside, she was in their way. One of them was fussing about with the vacuum-cleaner on the carpet in the front hall, and Nina, greatly perturbed, clutched at the handle of her trunk while the butler telephoned to Attorney Thorpe at his office.

When the call reached him, Thorpe was just having a professional interview of an unpleasant kind with some hard-boiled fellows who could not come to an agreement about an amalgamation of their mills.

"There's a lady here who wants to speak to Mr. Thorpe," announced the butler.

"What's the matter? A lady? I can't speak to any ladies right now," the attorney bellowed into the telephone.

"The lady says to tell you that Nina from the Central Stores is here."

Thorpe's face lit up, regardless of the business men who were watching him.

"She's there, is she? What does she want?"

"The lady's here with two suitcases."

"That's fine. She's to make herself comfortable for the time being. I'll come over as soon as I can," said Thorpe, slightly alarmed. It seemed unlike Nina to come bursting in upon him with two suitcases.

The process of making herself comfortable consisted of remaining cooped up in the vestibule where she sat with her two suitcases. And that was where Thorpe found her when he reached home. Although he had hurried, the afternoon had meanwhile set in. "Well, so you're here," was all he said. He asked no questions, he did not hesitate for a moment, and then he embraced her. Nina shut her eyes tight, as she always did when she was scared, and she submitted to the kiss. She would probably have to go through with this business if she wanted to hurt Eric properly—to hurt him as he had hurt her.

"Whisky," said Thorpe to his butler. "And put the suitcases in the visitor's room." He himself felt rather dazed by the suddenness with which happiness had burst in upon him. He drank his whisky and Nina left hers. "Will you tell me what has happened, or shall I guess?" he asked. Nina could still feel everything solidly stanched up inside her.

"I've had to leave my husband," she said demurely. "We don't suit each other. I'm not suited for marriage with a genius. You always knew that, didn't you? I'm not going back to the Central Stores; we should always be running into each other there, in the canteen and so on. I couldn't stand that."

She omitted to mention that she was not equal to an encounter with Lilian, but Thorpe was aware of it anyhow.

"I have no money," said Nina. "I shall have to look for a job. You are the only person I know——"

"We settled all that between us long ago," said Thorpe. "What I suggest is that you stay to-night in my visitor's room and to-morrow we'll go and choose a nice apartment for you."

"You're awfully kind," said Nina. Thorpe brushed her thanks aside.

"Let's drop the palaver," he said, and tiny beads of sweat showed themselves on his bald head. "We both know what it's all about. I'm not kind, it's only that I want you. Maybe we're a couple of lonely folks and—and both a bit down in the mouth over the same sort of set-back—and that's why we can get along well together. Is that a bargain?"

"It's a bargain," said Nina faintly. Thorpe stepped quickly up to her and kissed her again. She received the kiss with much the same ex-

pression on her face as when, in her childhood, she had swallowed a dose of castor-oil.

"Thanks, Mr. Thorpe," she said.

"My name's Steve," he replied rather awkwardly.

The butler showed her into the visitor's room and she had a feeling that his glances had weighed her in the balance and found her wanting.

"What is your name?" she asked shyly.

"Not James, for once in a way," the man answered. She did not know whether he meant it as insolence or not. He stood there waiting, and when she ventured on the beginnings of a smile, he kept a solemn face. "I will help madam to unpack," he said at last.

"Thanks all the same, but I'd rather do that myself," she replied.

She was ashamed of her belongings, of her cheap artificial silk underwear, of her stockings which had been repaired, of her shoes which had been soled. After a while, Thorpe came in, just as she was staring at her keepsakes, the two dolls, the photo and the revolver.

"Well, Nina, how are you feeling now?" he asked.

He caught sight of the revolver and a scared look came into his eyes. "You're not going to start any monkey business, I hope, my dear," he said and quickly put his hand on the old gun.

"No, that's only Dad's old Service pistol," she

explained. When she put the revolver back into her trunk, she nervously shut her eyes tight, just as she had done when Mr. Thorpe kissed her. He bent down and picked up a slip of paper which had dropped on to the floor.

"That's nothing," she said hastily and put it away. It was another keepsake—the hotel bill of their wedding night in Connecticut.

"Well, put on your best bib and tucker and we'll have a jolly evening," said Thorpe and left her feeling rather at a loss.

Nina put on her "best bib and tucker." She had only one frock which answered this description and that was, unfortunately, a gift from Eric. She managed to keep up an air of cheerfulness by shutting her eyes from time to time and giving Mr. Thorpe a kiss. The jolly evening turned out to be more of a problem. She had difficulty in feeling at her ease while the butler, with a ruthless gaze, stood at the sideboard or served dishes which she found distasteful. Beside each plate there were six sets of eating appliances which bewildered Nina very much, but she did what she could. After the meal they went into the other room, and there she actually did a little singing at the piano, picking out the accompaniment with one finger. Mr. Thorpe seemed to like this, and he promised that she should have a music teacher.

The time passed, and Mr. Thorpe became

silent and pensive. He laid an arm round her shoulder, the room was unpleasantly warm, but Nina stood her ground. She had made up her mind to take a header into this business. All of a sudden, without stopping to reflect. But she did not know how to set about it. She smiled shyly at Mr. Thorpe when he took her on his knee. She felt a sense of relief when it occurred to her that he was just as nervous as herself. At last the continued silence made her tired, and she began to yawn. He at once stood up.

"Now we'll put the little girl to bed," he said, and the remark jarred on her. She did not know that the whole time he had been carrying on a dialogue with the spectre of his wife.

On the landing he picked her up, with the idea of carrying her into her room, but this project came to nothing, and he panted a little as he put her down again. He opened the door of the visitor's room and stood aside as she entered. The lamp was burning on the night-table and the bed was made. Mr. Thorpe looked like a man who has gone to fetch his hat from the cloak-room although he has lost the ticket. When he embraced her, she began to cry. She was ashamed of herself for doing so, but she could not help it. She felt Mr. Thorpe's big face in her hands and his big face and bulky body—it was all so queer, very queer, and not a trace of the thrill which she always felt when Eric came

up close to her with his slender, willowy limbs. And she cried without stint.

It had been a very trying day for her. She had not cried when she discovered that Eric was deceiving her, nor when she had packed her trunk, nor when she had left the house. The whole day she had betrayed no more emotion than if she had been a little stone image, and now she felt that she was entitled to have a good cry.

Mr. Thorpe was genuinely alarmed and comforted her as best he could.

"What's the matter? What's upset you?" he asked as he fondled her.

"I want to be alone—I want to have a good cry," she sobbed, conscious that she was not playing the game.

"Come, come, I won't eat you," said Mr. Thorpe. He certainly had not the slightest intention of eating Nina. He withdrew and left her alone in her bed, the silk counterpane of which was quite beyond her control, and kept slipping on to the floor. And the sum total of Nina's experience that night was that the upper classes had beds quite peculiar to themselves.

The next day Thorpe wanted to choose an apartment for her. But when he reached his office he found a telegram calling him immediately to Minneapolis. It was a matter involving

the amalgamation of two factories, and it was very important—much more important than Nina.

She had decided to be nice to him as soon as he came home, but he did not come home. He telephoned to his butler to pack a suitcase for him and bring it to his office. It looked as if he had completely forgotten that Nina was staying in his house. The truth was that he did not dare, in Miss Tackle's presence, to call up a lady in his own house. From the station he sent her a telegram: "Have a good time. Shall be back in three days." Nina sat in front of the fireplace with the telegram in her hands. The butler had lit a fire as it was raining, and she could not think of a single place where she could have taken refuge.

'Have a good time,' she thought scornfully. Her heart unceasingly ached with grief and home-sickness and longing for Eric. And then there were the annoyances, the glances of the servants, the vast boredom of having nothing to do, the meals alone in the big dining-room. And at night, whenever in her sleep she stretched out her hand, she clutched at the emptiness of an utterly strange room—no Eric, but only a fiendish counterpane which kept slipping down until she dreamt that she was standing in her chemise on a bridge amid the pouring rain and a boisterous gale.

The next morning she received a letter which Thorpe must have scribbled in the train. The

writing looked all askew, as if it had been blown about by the wind. The letter ran:

"*My dear Nina,*

"*It is a pity that I had to leave suddenly. We will make up for everything when I get back. Buy yourself some nice frocks or anything else you fancy—we will step out in a big way. See you soon.*

"*Yours,*

"*Steve.*"

A blank cheque was enclosed. Nina toyed with it, suppressed an impulse to throw it into the fire, and after a while began to smile.

On the third day, when there were still no signs of Thorpe, she did what she had been craving to do. She called up Mrs. Bradley after business hours, at a time when she was sure to be at home. Mrs. Bradley gave vent to a number of exclamations, and through the telephone Nina could hear Skimpy dashing about. She did not ask whether Eric was at home. "How are things with you?" she asked.

"Pretty fair, thanks. Old man Philipp gets dippier every day."

"And how's your pain?"

"It's been better for the last two days. But we miss you, Nina."

"What do the people at the store say about me not coming any more?"

"They're green with envy. They say you've had a very lucky break."

Nina hesitated, but she could no longer keep the question back:

"And how's my husband?"

"Oh, all right so far."

"I see."

So he was all right. She reflected a moment. The butler came along, and she felt as if she were in prison and under observation. She waited until the coast was clear.

"Listen, Mrs. Bradley, his grey suit is still at the cleaner's—it'll have to be fetched. And he mustn't smoke such a dreadful lot, Mrs. Bradley. How does he look? Does he come home at night? Who presses his pants? He's so fussy about the creases. Mrs. Bradley, don't tell him on any account that I called up."

No, even that didn't make her any easier in her mind. The next day she called up again. And then she put the cheque into her hand-bag and made her way, as large as life, to the Central Stores.

After all, a department store is a place to be visited by anybody who feels inclined. And anybody who was once employed in a department store and has had a very lucky break and goes back there as a customer, is treated as a customer.

Nina kept away from staircase five and went first of all to the china department, her depart-

ment, her native heath, as it were, and then she stood at the counter where set number 279 E/14, with the rose pattern, was displayed.

"What can I do for you, madam?" asked Miss Drivot. She did not see Nina's face. Customers have no faces.

"How's business these days, Miss Drivot?" asked Nina softly.

"Why, if it isn't—— Thanks, business is all right," said Miss Drivot. "Is there anything you want? Would you like to buy something? The china set with the roses has just been reduced."

Mr. Berg went past and eyed the two of them narrowly.

"Pardon me, I must attend to another customer," said Miss Drivot. She darted off and left Nina in front of the rose pattern. Even here she felt like a fish out of water. Mr. Berg looked at her with disapproval, nodded casually and passed on.

The pleats showed themselves on her forehead as she drifted through the illuminated hall into the ready-made dress department, past the summer frocks, to the stylish regions of the fashion section. Her heart beat furiously. But she had a blank cheque in her hand-bag.

"I should like to be attended to," she said when she had run Lilian to earth.

"Why, just imagine—it's Nina!" said Lilian.

"I want an evening frock. White, but it must be something first-rate," said Nina icily. Lilian made a face, but at that moment Madame Chalon, blissfully unaware of what was afoot, came along that way. Now this was something to which Nina had looked forward with fiendish glee. She settled down in the easy-chair, and Lilian had to rush about. She made Lilian rush about with a vengeance. She inflicted upon her all the woes which a saleswoman can suffer at the hands of a customer by way of capricious, bad-tempered and erratic behaviour. But just as Lilian had reached the limits of her endurance and was about to lose her nerve, Nina reached the limits of her endurance too. She simply could no longer bear the sight of Lilian, those lovely bare shoulders, that swaying gait, that face, that body, that arrant female, who had taken her husband away from her. She rose abruptly, muttered something that sounded like a sob, and hurried away. Lilian wiped tiny beads of sweat from her forehead.

Nina rode home; she rode in Thorpe's stylish car which the butler had forced upon her, and Tony, the handsome chauffeur, treated her as if she were the Queen of England. She made herself comfortable in the visitor's room, and proceeded to brush the two dogs. Her throat ached with the emotions which she had kept back.

All of a sudden the dogs started barking

noisily and scampered to the door. Nina felt alarmed. The house was full of bustle and the sound of voices. Mr. Thorpe had arrived. To her astonishment, Nina discovered that she was glad. She jumped up and ran to meet him. She managed the first kiss of welcome without having to shut her eyes tight. Thorpe fondled her. He had brought a present for her, too, a necklace of green stones. Then he disappeared into the bathroom to spruce himself up after his journey. For another half-hour or so he was still rather deaf from the din of the aeroplane, but that gave over.

"Now let's see what you bought with the cheque," he said, and began to laugh when Nina showed signs of embarrassment. She dashed up into the visitor's room, snatched the cheque from her bag and handed it back to the astonished Thorpe. "Well, I'm——" he exclaimed. She now enjoyed a sense of relief at the thought that she had not spent his money. It made her feel that she had not completely sold herself to him.

"Now you've nothing to put on, and we were going to step out together," he said. He was firmly convinced that anyone who wanted to gain the favour of a girl-friend and keep her in a good humour must be constantly supplying her with presents and entertainment. As a matter of fact, he had treated Lucy, his own wife, in much the same way. When he stood in front of his

mirror, rubbed his bald head with eau-de-Cologne, and squeezed himself into a tuxedo, he had a vague feeling that it was a tiring business to win Nina's affections. Slippers, his dogs, a glass of whisky and the latest magazines by the fireside—that was what his thoughts hankered after. But he was determined to achieve his aim that evening. Nina was determined too.

Once again she wore the blue frock with the touch of silver, and he took her to a stylish resort. Music, dancing, champagne, lots of people, a confused blend of voices and perfumes. The night-club had been designed like the interior of a liner. This in itself made the visitors feel more reckless and romantic, and induced them to spend their money more freely. The waiters were dressed like French sailors, with large pompons on the tops of their caps, and this evidently caused them some embarrassment.

"Well, so there we are," said Thorpe complacently, when he had ordered the food. Here, too, there were more sets of eating appliances than were necessary, but Nina was now quite at home in such matters. As, to start with, Thorpe had taken her along to the cocktail bar, she was in a sprightly mood and talked nineteen to the dozen. She had gulped down the first two cocktails in sheer desperation, so as to work herself up quickly into the mood that was expected of her. Now, during the meal, she smoked reck-

lessly. "Shall we dance, Mr. Thorpe—I mean Steve?" she asked. The music had kindled in her a craving which she had never felt before. But when Thorpe had trapsed round the dance-floor with her once, she began to droop again. "It's nicer to sit and look on," she said. Thorpe ordered more drinks. He kept to brandy and urged Nina to have champagne.

"Champagne makes you gay—champagne warms you up," he explained. Nina drank obediently, and she drank a lot at a time, as if the champagne were a medicine to cure her unhappiness. And her cheeks did, in fact, redden beneath the powder which she had thinly dabbed on them, and her eyes began to shine. "You're sweet," said Mr. Thorpe. "Sez you," she retorted in an accent which plainly smacked of the Central Stores. And unfortunately it turned out that now the very first time she had ever been tipsy, she was becoming unruly and defiant. She had always been gentle and easy-going before—now she suddenly showed the stuff she was made of.

"They're a lot of skunks," she said and pointed to the high-class people in the high-class establishment. "They're skunks, every single one of them. Folks like me could spill the beans about them. The way they give us folks the works for the few bucks they spend."

She looked round, burst out laughing at one of

the waiters in naval attire, and then her glance fell on Thorpe.

"You're just the same as the others, Steve," she said. "You think you can buy me with your money. Be honest about it. You do think so—with that cheque of yours—you're nothing but a skunk, a fat, little skunk with just a few bristles on your head."

Thorpe was rather alarmed. He quickly called for the bill, paid it and then stowed Nina away in his car before matters became really distressing. Tony, the chauffeur, caught his eye with the knowing glance of one man to another, and got the limousine gently under way.

Nina had, meanwhile, gained a firm hold on her train of thoughts and showered wholesale abuse on the luckless Thorpe. In her fuddled state she said the most outrageous things to him that he had heard since his separation from Lucy. She jeered at his money, his paunch, his bald head, and his lack of youth. Indeed, in the end he had a pretty low opinion of himself. Just as he was considering whether to get out and let Nina proceed alone to White Plains, she threw her arms round his neck and began to sob. He patted her soothingly on the shoulder, in much the same way as he caressed Max and Moritz, and so they drove on northwards.

In her fuddled state Nina was quite desperate and ready for anything. But, oddly enough, this

particular evening *he* was the one who refused. He wanted nothing from her if he could get it only in that mean, low-down way. He showed her to her room, where she immediately squatted down on the bed in the posture in which people sit in the waiting-rooms of railway stations and wait for their train. The tears which she had shed still shone moistly on the taut skin of her girlish face. Thorpe sighed. He pitied her, but pity is not a good starting-point for dalliance. He went no further than the door.

"Don't you think you could be just a little fond of me?" he asked timidly.

Nina seemed to return from somewhere as she answered point-blank: "No, I don't think so. Not that way."

Thorpe hurried off to his room. It was two o'clock in the morning. He sat down with a glass of whisky in front of the fireplace and lifted one of the dogs on to his lap, for he felt chilly.

XV

FOR several weeks Lilian had been haunted by the same dream. She was trying to catch a train but could not. She arrived panting and breathless, only to see the train already on the move. Then she went down a flight of stairs, which were a little like the subway stairs, but enlarged and distorted as things in dreams are apt to be. She went down, down, farther and farther downwards. She did not want to go, for there, at the bottom, stood someone who kept striking a match, and then she could see the stairs which led into the darkness, down, down, down, and she went farther and farther downwards. And as she went, she heard the ting-a-ling of the bell at the pawnbroker's. Lilian had moved away from her parents and taken an apartment in 44th Street West. Her room was always full of cigarette smoke, some man or other was always sprawling on her sofa—one of Bill's friends. Bill was the man who had followed her when she left the pawnbroker's shop. He was a big, good-looking creature, short-tempered, easy-going and conscious of his power. He was fond of cats and two of them had been

accommodated in Lilian's apartment. The other men did as he told them. Jerky, Big Paw and Kid, the boy of eighteen. They had settled down in Lilian's apartment, they formed part of her existence, so to speak, with their card-games, their foul language, their drinks, their revolvers and their girl-friends. Bill came at irregular intervals, but he was their boss. They had plenty of money left from their last pay-off. Lilian's share consisted of frocks and an ermine cloak. She went to night-clubs; they frequented the resorts in which Bill cut a figure as a respectable citizen. Bill had a car, Bill had connections and influence, Bill had power. Bill had gained the upper hand over Lilian by threats, by promises, by brute force and at the point of the revolver.

It had all started with the ring—it was the stolen ring that had given him a hold on her, and it was tighter and more difficult to break than an iron chain. She did not know exactly what the gang intended to use her for, but she realized that she was being lavishly equipped for some purpose or other. Bill would not let her give up her job. He promised her that later on he would get a part for her in the biggest revue on Broadway. 'I can help myself to anything I want on Broadway," he said, and she almost believed it. She was feverish and scared, and felt at the end of her tether, and the result was that she began to drink. Once Bill had given her cocaine as well. It

produced an unutterably grand feeling in her at the time, but she felt awful the next day at the Central Stores. The people of the underworld have their own dungeons to keep their captives in, and escape is not easy. Sometimes Lilian could have almost roared with laughter when she was badgered by Madame Chalon or a customer. She pictured to herself how they would scream and shudder if Bill were to come bursting in with his revolver. Bill had his chivalrous moments where Lilian was concerned. He also had a girl-friend, a blonde named Maxime, who kept watch on him with a frantic jealousy. At times Lilian went in fear of having a broadside of vitriol thrown into her face. But so far there had been no mishap. Occasionally she felt almost glad that things had turned out that way. There was a streak of evil in her—always had been. Now for the first time in her life she was given scope and the proper atmosphere to put into effect her hatred for the people who were born at the top and lived at the top.

In the underworld she became a sort of queen. Sometimes she had fits of hectic gaiety. At other times she grew rebellious, and Bill had to make her knuckle under again. "What do you want me for? Why are you training me this way?" she used to shout at him. Bill's coarse mouth would then break into a smile. His lips were always dry and chapped, and deep red with abounding

health. He would never be ruined by booze and cocaine. All that Lilian could discover was that they intended to make use of her in the Central Stores, in the den that she loathed so much. Meanwhile she went on attending to the customers. "Yes, madam, certainly, madam. You look charming, madam." She had become the tool of men who came out of the darkness and would disappear into the darkness. Lilian knew them only as anyone might know the shapes of people in a dream. She kept on walking down the stairs, downwards, downwards. Ting-a-ling went the bell.

"I'm quite done for," she said to Eric.

"Done for? How do you mean? What about?" he asked.

"You wouldn't understand. Don't ask dumb questions. Let's have a cigarette."

Eric lit the cigarette for her and his hand was unsteady as he did so. Lilian looked scornfully at the tiny flame of the match that gleamed fitfully. "I often dream of a man who stands at the bottom of the stairs and keeps lighting a match," she said.

"So even in your dreams you deceive me," answered Eric, and affected to sigh deeply. They were all alone in the big studio in which the junior members of the propaganda staff worked out their designs. Lilian in the white frock that she had worn on the steamboat, and Eric painting, smoking, then painting again with unsteady hands. It

had begun with that kiss, and since then he had not had a moment's peace.

He had suppressed the painter in him too long. The trouble started when he saw Lilian in her white frock that luckless evening on the steamboat. "It's like the measles," he moaned. "I must get it out of my system or I shall die of blood-poisoning." Lilian smiled, without understanding what he meant, but she went on acting as his model. In her tangled and wasted life the hours with Eric were all that mattered. She had a queer, mournful passion for him—it was as if she were always saying farewell to something. Meanwhile, the picture which he was painting made progress. "That's not me at all," said Lilian and gazed at the portrait with angry eyes. "What's wrong with it?" asked Eric, stepping back from the easel. "Strawberry ice," she said, and laughed scornfully. "You're all mistaken, you don't know a thing about me."

"If I painted you as you really are, you God-forsaken vamp, it's a cinch I wouldn't win the first prize for the poster," said Eric as he approached his work with louring glances and added a few reckless daubs of paint to it. "There's nothing so hard to paint as white," he remarked. "The story goes that when Renoir was an old man he said: 'I'd be satisfied if I could paint a white napkin—nothing but a white napkin.'"

Lilian was bored by this digression into the history of art. "Are you sure you'll get the prize?" she asked.

"Don't you worry about that, honey. We'll have a thousand dollars all right, and we'll spend them making whoopee together," said Eric. She knew he hated her because Nina had left him on her account. Eric stopped painting and thoughtfully squeezed out more Chinese white on to his palette. He, too, was thinking of Nina. He remembered everything that he had planned to do with the thousand dollars, the dreams that had faded and been slain.

"I saw her yesterday," said Lilian, as if he had been proclaiming his thoughts from the housetops. "Who?" he asked in a curt tone and started painting hastily. Lilian did not take the slightest notice of the unnecessary question. "The old guy she's living with seems to give her lots of dough. You ought to have seen the way she carried on in the store. Miss this and Miss that. For two pins I'd have given her a smack in the kisser, believe me."

"How does she look?" asked Eric after a long pause, in spite of himself.

"She looks delightful, bewitching, charming—that's the answer you want, isn't it?"

Eric laid his brush down and walked towards Lilian. She moved back a little for she at first thought that he was going to strike her. But

Eric was not Bill, and he had no revolver in his pocket, either. "Why can't you leave Nina out of it now that you've managed to separate us?" he muttered in a threatening tone.

Lilian stopped to think before she answered. She wanted to make a number of insulting remarks, but she left them unsaid. She was jealous of Nina, but she was unwilling to admit as much. She loved Eric in her own way, as far as she was capable of loving anyone, but she could hardly say that. She threw her cigarette away and trod on it. "Why is it that everything I touch turns mouldy?" she said at last. She meant it to sound pitiable. Eric caught the slight throb in her voice and went back to his easel.

The picture was only half finished. It consisted of a green expanse of sea with white-crested waves, on which there was a sailing-boat with orange-coloured sails. Lilian, in her white frock, was leaning against the sail. Eric had painted the lines of her body in close detail, the right shoulder and the head were finished, but the left-hand side of the picture still looked sketchy and faint. Only three days were left until the time-limit for sending in the competitors' efforts. Eric had painted frantically, both before and after business hours. Since Nina had left him he dreaded going home. He could not stand the sight of her empty bed. And old man Philipp and Mrs. Bradley did not speak a word to him.

Skimpy did all the talking. She made herself a nuisance by asking when Nina was coming back and where she had gone to.

He preferred to stay at the Central Stores. He spent the night on an old couch in the studio there, and painted at odd hours during the night. Sometimes Cromwell, the new detective, looked him up. He brought a bottle of gin with him and made the most appalling comments on the picture. Eric had a sort of feeling that Lilian and Cromwell were up to something. The detective could not resist the temptation to make a few sneering remarks: "The thighs ain't so long as what they are in the picture," he would say. Or: "I know that dame from cover to cover. She's got long legs, but not so long as all that." Or: "If I was a painter, I'd do a picture of her lying down. That's the way to show up the best points." This made Eric so furious that he declined the gin which the detective offered him. "Still, it's a swell poster all right. You'll get the first prize, you bet your life," said Cromwell affably and departed. It was all that Eric could do to overcome an impulse to shove his foot through the painted canvas and join his mother at the asylum. But instead of that he squeezed out fresh colours on to his palette, and did his level best to get the picture finished in time. Since Nina had left him, painting was the only thing that interested him enough to make him forget

for a few hours what had happened. Strangely enough, his infatuation for Lilian, the morbid discontent and unrest that she had aroused in him, had wilted ever since he had lost Nina. It was sheer wilfulness which made him go on clinging to Lilian. He was like a sick man who refuses to leave the bed in which he has suffered for weeks on end.

Richard Cromwell's hints were not the only thing which left him guessing with regard to Lilian. One Saturday, when he had received his meagre salary, he took her to a night-club as she asked him to do. He put on his tuxedo, for she seemed to attach particular importance to that, and she herself sported an ermine cloak. She swept majestically into the establishment and her good looks attracted all eyes. Eric felt proud but also rather uncomfortable. He did not ask how she, with her twenty-five dollars a week, could manage to afford an ermine cloak. Two men, who looked like gangsters, nodded to her familiarly.

"Who are those guys?" he asked.

"Some folks I know," replied Lilian in a non-committal manner.

At bottom Eric knew nothing about her. He knew that she could dance the tango well, and that her mouth had a bitter taste of vanilla from the lipstick which she used. He did not even know where she lived. She had told him that

she had moved away from her parents, but she kept her address to herself. She never let him escort her home, but always took a taxi and drove off, while he, until the small hours, sauntered idly alone in the welter of lights on Broadway, and thought of Nina.

XVI

IT was Wednesday afternoon, dollar day in all departments of the Central Stores. In the silk section there was a clearance sale of remnants which were displayed on the counters. Two policemen stood at the entrance, and three of each article could be bought for a dollar. Three shirts, three pairs of silk stockings, three genuine linen towels, three brilliant clips, not genuine. Cromwell had his work cut out keeping order on the sixth storey. There each article was being sold by the dozen. A dozen wine-glasses, a dozen coffee-cups, a dozen gold-bordered plates in the glass and china department. Miss Drivot was frenziedly busy, her face was covered with small beads of sweat and numerous tiny red veins. It looked as if the circulation of her blood was not equal to the rush of customers. Mr. Berg, the departmental floor-walker, helped in person with the job of serving customers, although it was no part of his duties. The new saleswoman, who had been taken on to replace Nina, was clumsy. She did not know the ropes yet, and Miss Drivot kept on snarling hoarsely to her the prices and other details of the goods.

There was a crowd of people at the delivery counter. A clattering noise was heard. Mrs. Bradley had broken a crystal-glass dish.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Berg, as he proceeded on patrol duty.

"Nothing—nothing at all," said Mrs. Bradley, terror-stricken. She was feverish. What with the fever and the pain in her side, she could not see properly. Everything seemed to be twisting and turning and swaying before her eyes. She left a parcel half-packed and staggered to the staff staircase. Scarcely had she passed through the glass door than she fell down in a faint.

She was taken away quickly, without any noise or fuss. The arrangements for first-aid worked smoothly, and fainting females were nothing unusual on dollar days. The half-packed parcel was still lying on the delivery counter as Mrs. Bradley was already being prepared for the ambulance car.

"How much longer am I to be kept waiting for my parcel?" asked the customer snappishly. But Mr. Berg straightened everything out.

"Right now, just one moment, if you please, madame," he said glibly. A girl slipped into Mrs. Bradley's place, a small, red-haired girl with a big, laughing mouth. The parcel was duly packed and handed to the customer. It does not cause much of a hitch when one out of seven hundred is put out of action.

Half an hour later Mrs. Bradley was smothered in ether, and she sighed with relief as the big droning billows swept her away. A doctor in rubber boots and a linen mask was operating on her appendix. It was the four thousand eight hundred and sixty-second appendix that he had removed in his life-time, and accordingly it did not occasion him any great concern. "A particularly nasty appendix," he afterwards remarked critically to the anæsthetist's assistant as he was washing his hands. Mrs. Bradley was put into a hospital bed with a temperature chart at the top end. Her life had been in danger and she had been saved, but she knew nothing about that. She was still under ether, and was driving with Mr. Bradley to a picnic in a funny car which in the year 1924 had been considered exceedingly smart.

Meanwhile it was five minutes past six, and the Central Stores were disgorging the last customers into the street. The exhausted saleswomen were powdering their moist noses in the cloak-room, and the cashiers were frenziedly getting their accounts straight. Cromwell, the detective, took the lift up to the twelfth storey to fetch his overcoat. Whistling a tune, he stepped into his office, which was only a cubby-hole looking out on to the yard of the old premises, and there he discovered old man Philipp.

"Hallo, Philipp," he said, and looked at the old

man who was pottering about with some dog's-eared papers on the table.

"Hallo, Cromwell," said Philipp placidly.

"Putting things straight a bit?" asked Cromwell breezily.

"I'm getting my things together. My three months are up next week," answered the old detective. Cromwell, who with the help of a pocket-mirror was smoothing his hair, stopped whistling. "It's a shame," he said, and left it at that. The next moment he was back again among problems of his own.

"Say, Philipp, how often do you have to shave?" he asked, thrust his tongue into his cheek, and inspected in the little pocket-mirror the object of interest.

"Once, as a matter of fact," said Philipp with distaste.

"I have to twice a day, that is, when I've got a date in the evening.... If I don't, the girls make a row," said Cromwell. He breathed on the mirror, rubbed his sleeve over it and put it into his pocket. The clotted stupidity of all these antics put Philipp's back up. "You sent me word that I was to wait for you," he remarked crustily.

"Yes, that's right, sure thing," said Cromwell. "I wanted to ask you to stay here to-night. Of course, you can sleep, there's nothing doing, it's only a matter of routine. The fact is, I've got a

date, see. I must have a night to myself sometimes. A man's entitled to step out now and then, ain't he?"

"It's a bit awkward to-day," said Philipp. "Mrs. Bradley, who I lodge with, has just been taken to the hospital. I wanted to stay with the kid—she's all alone in the house."

"That's sure nice of you," said Cromwell, "but when all's said and done you're not a nurse but a detective. I'm sorry. I've promised a girl from the fashion department to take her out to-night and you know what it is with dames."

"All right, then. Have a good time," said Philipp, anxious to bring the chatter to a close. "I'll keep watch."

"You don't need to keep watch. Since I've been here not so much as a packet of pins has gone astray. You have a good snooze, and if you want to have a look round, somewhere about midnight will do."

"That's O.K. by me. I know the place better than you do," said Philipp. Cromwell took this in good part. He was sorry for the old man. He went over to him and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm mighty grateful to you for doing me a good turn. The girl's a choice piece of goods—with that kind you have to keep on the go if you want to get anywhere," he said. Philipp scowled at the door, which closed behind him.

For a while he went on rummaging in his

pigeon-hole, from which he was anxious to remove his belongings. A few letters, old newspaper-cuttings, the faded remains of a single-track, humdrum life. He tried to read a few of the old cuttings, but they looked all blurred to him. Since he had given up drink, old man Philipp lived in a dim and hazy world. His sight was bad, there was a buzzing in his ears, so that he scarcely understood what people said to him, and he forgot names, faces and telephone numbers. His back made a creaking noise when he drew himself up. His eye lighted on a bottle which Cromwell had left on the table. It was the gin which Eric had declined. With dismay Philipp felt his hands beginning to tremble as he stared at the bottle. He went back to his drawer and, by force of habit, he slipped his revolver into the side-pocket of his coat. The feel of the fire-arm close to his body gave him more confidence. He stepped briskly to the table, opened the bottle—the small metal capsule at the top seemed huge as he manipulated it—and then he took three deep gulps. The gin coursed sharp and hot down his gullet and he at once began to feel the warmth generously surging through his chest. For a moment the buzzing in his ears became a roar and then suddenly stopped altogether. Old man Philipp gazed round in astonishment as a sudden perspicacity and calm gathered strength within him. He hastily took another drink, and then

went out of the room and quickly down the corridor which led to the designers' studio.

"Say, Bengtson," he said, as he went in. "Would you mind going straight home and breaking the news to Skimpy that her mother's sick? I have to go on duty to-night."

Eric was standing in front of an easel on which he had covered a picture with an old sheet of canvas. He took a few brushes and went across to the sink to rinse them out.

"I'm sorry—I mean about Mrs. Bradley. Lilian's just told me what happened. But I can't get away either. The whole of section B 8 has to be rearranged overnight."

B8 was the section for printed silks, on the third storey. As Philipp was well aware, after the dollar day it looked like a battlefield. "What's going on over there?" he said, and looked round at Lilian. She stood near the table in her little black business frock, she carried her cloak over her arm and held a green cap in her hand. It was odd how distinctly his brain suddenly once more seized on every detail. Images, noises, smells. He heard the water-tap dripping after Eric had finished rinsing out his brushes, and the smell of Lilian's perfume smote his nostrils as if it were something palpable.

There was something about that cloying perfume that irritated him, and he turned crossly to Lilian. "Say, you've often spent the night

with us at Fieldston—couldn't you go out there and stay with Skimpy?" he asked. Lilian drew her shoulders up. "I'd be glad to, but I've an urgent appointment," she said. Eric took off his soiled smock and slipped into his coat. Philipp looked round doubtfully. "That's so—I quite forgot about it," he then said, as he recalled the hints that Toughy had dropped. It all came back to him so distinctly that he could see every hair on the young detective's face again. Eric looked at him with a touch of astonishment.

"Lilian's going to sit for me to-night as soon as I've rearranged B 8," he said. "To-morrow's the time-limit—I haven't made any headway during the last few days." He took his keys out of his pocket and went to the door. "I'd just like to have a quick snack," he said. Lilian followed him. In the light from the electric lamps it struck Philipp how pale Bengtson looked. A faint gleam of sweat lay on his set features and the two Gary Cooper creases in his cheeks had become deeper and full of shadows. Philipp left the studio with the two of them and saw Eric lock the door behind him. While he watched them walking towards the left, he pondered on the situation. It looked as if that girl Lilian had made appointments for that night with two men. She must be mighty smart if she intended keeping both appointments.

The store was now empty and hushed. It be-

longed to old man Philipp, just as it had belonged to him for many years past. He roamed up and down the staircases from storey to storey, and peeped into all the corners. Soon he began to feel queerly restless and uneasy. He looked at his hands. They shook when he held them out. He took his keys, unlocked the gate of a lift and went back to the twelfth storey. The whole passage reeked of Lilian. He went to his office and drank half of the gin that was still left in the bottle. Then he picked up the telephone and asked to be put through to Skimpy.

"Aren't you surprised that we're not home yet?"

"Yes, Uncle Philipp. Is anything the matter?"

"Listen, Skimpy, we're all very busy. Are you scared being all alone in the house? Or will you be a good girl and go to bed?"

It took some little while before Skimpy, at her end of the telephone, had taken this in.

"Do you mean that mother isn't coming home?"

"Yes, that's just what I do mean. She doesn't feel too good and the nurse is looking after her."

"But I've fixed the supper for you all."

"I want to know if you feel scared alone in the house."

There was another pause.

"Yes, Uncle Philipp," Skimpy then said in a tiny voice, which had already begun to shake tearfully.

Philipp, with his newly acquired insight, did not need to think for more than a second.

"Listen carefully now, Skimpy," he said. "In a few minutes a car will hoot three times in front of the house. That will be a taxi that I'm sending to fetch you. You'll ride in it as far as the Central Stores and there you'll ask the man at the entrance for me. You've met Joe before, haven't you? Then you can stay with me and help me to look after the store. Would you like that?"

"And the toys as well?"

"Yes. Now hurry up and get your things on. The taxi will be hooting pretty soon."

Philipp chuckled to himself when, instead of any further reply, he heard only the rapid click of the receiver being hung up. He consulted the telephone directory, called up a taxi rank at White Plains, gave all the necessary instructions, together with the assurance that the fare would be paid as soon as the little girl had been duly handed over at the Central Stores, and he then hung up again. He took another sip of the gin and called up the hospital to which Mrs. Bradley had been taken. All was well, they told him. The operation had been a success, the patient was still a little dazed from the anæsthetic, but quite out of danger. Philipp heaved a sigh of relief, shuffled past the half-empty bottle and left the twelfth storey. He reckoned that Skimpy could not be there in less than half an hour, and that

would give him just enough time to patrol the store once again. For twenty-seven years he had always started with the strong-room, and he did so now. He examined all the alarm signals in the semi-darkness there. As he came out he ran into one of the night-watchmen who was setting the time-clock at staircase eight, and exchanged a few words with him. Then he ambled on. In the big office where the typists worked the typewriters all stood in neat ranks, each one swathed in its black wax-cloth covering. He passed on, strolled from storey to storey, here and there flashed his pocket-lamp into dark corners, stood and listened to the hush of the vast premises, and then moved on again. When he reached the ground floor, he made a brief stop at Joe's cubby-hole. "Listen, Joe, a little girl's being brought here by taxi. It's Mrs. Bradley's kid. Here's the money for the fare, and let me know the moment she comes, will you." "O.K., chief," replied Joe and saluted. They were old friends who had shared many spells of night duty. Moreover, Joe had lent a helping hand when Mrs. Bradley had been lifted on the stretcher into the ambulance car. "I'm only going down into the basement, and then I'll be through," said Philipp and proceeded on his way. Joe watched him with a shake of the head as his bulky shadow disappeared along the wall. 'It's tough luck on the old fellow,' he thought gloomily.

Philipp sauntered along, through the low-priced regions of the basement. Here, utter chaos prevailed after the conflicts of dollar day. He went past the armoury which was located there, made a bee-line through the cheap furnishings, and at last reached the iron door of the fur repository. He took out his keys and his pocket-lamp, and opened the complicated lock. He opened the second door and entered. It was dark here, but he switched the lights on and then took a deep breath of the chilly air, which had a curdled flavour. Down here the furs hung in rows, each fur neatly packed in a moth-proof bag. They had more than a hundred thousand dollars' worth hanging there among the rows of pipes which belonged to the refrigerating plant. Philipp had always had a weakness for the fur repository. It was a world to itself down there, cold and isolated. The actual room was very high, and intersected everywhere by a maze of pipes which kept the temperature steadily down to 28° Fahrenheit. He paraded past the rows of furs, with the mechanical precision resulting from years of usage, found that everything was as it should be, and returned to the door. Mechanically he moved the switch that operated the burglar-alarm and stepped into the doorway to make the bell start ringing. The entrance to the fur repository, like the strong-room, was studded with automatic burglar-alarms.

As the whole procedure was mechanical and followed a regular routine, old man Philipp almost failed to notice that the alarm bells did not respond to the switch which operated them. It took a whole second before the silence descended upon him like a palpable object, like a dark blanket or a numbing blow. He stood stock-still and his hands trembled violently. He clutched at his revolver. It was a pointless thing to do. Now he could hear his heart thumping, in his chest, in his temples, everywhere. The burglar-alarm was out of order

As everything remained silent, and there were no signs of anyone whom he could shoot, the old detective proceeded to investigate why the alarm did not work. It might only be a small defect in the electric wiring which the cock-sure Toughy had overlooked. He groped among the concealed switches, opened a small iron box in the wall and tried to turn on the light in a red electric bulb. The warning light failed to work, just as the burglar-alarm had failed to work. Cautiously he closed the box and passed warily through the doorway. A few automatic guns had been installed there, but he had never thought much of them. He went back into the fur repository, and amid the vinegary air and the silence he searched every inch of the place. He probably did not realize that he was acting in a foolish and reckless manner, for if burglars had been hiding

among the furs, he would have been made away with long ago. In the breathless tension produced by his discovery he had quite forgotten Skimpy. Suddenly he thought of the child again. He left the fur repository, passed cautiously through the doorway and closed both doors behind him. With his hand on the revolver in his pocket, he hurried through the basement and went upstairs in the lift. During the few seconds which he took to do this, he had made his plans. He decided not to mention his suspicions either to the police or to the night-watchmen. If it should afterwards turn out that there was only a trifling flaw, such as a fuse burnt out or a short circuit, they would make fun of him. If anything was amiss in the fur repository—and a thudding, hammering, breathless instinct told him that there was—then he would do all the fighting on his own, he would face all the danger and take all the credit.

"Well, so you've turned up," he said as he reached Joe's cubby-hole and discovered Skimpy there. She looked very spruce, as if she had scoured her hands and face with soap before starting on her great adventure. "Joe says that mother's in the hospital," she said, and hid her face against his stomach, but she did not cry.

"Yes, but she's going on all right and she's sent to tell you not to be scared. To-morrow morning we're going to see her," said Philipp. He had

not the faintest idea what he was to do with the child now. He would have to return to the fur repository. "Wouldn't you like to stay with Joe and sleep on his sofa?" he said. "No," replied Skimpy with great promptness. The sofa in question was an ancient relic from which the horse-hair was sticking out and which reeked of shag. Joe laughed good-humouredly. "I want to go where the toys are," said Skimpy. She was on the verge of tears but she managed to show a bold front. Philipp took her by the hand. "Joe," he said before they left, "listen, keep your eyes well peeled to-night. If you notice anything that seems phoney, call the police straight away—you understand?"

"Sure thing, chief," said Joe and saluted again. He did not understand at all. 'The old fellow's getting old,' was all he thought.

Philipp released the lift and went up to the toy department. The child's hand which he was holding, with its moist friendly warmth, relieved his mind a little. "Now pick something out to play with, but make haste, and don't forget: you've only borrowed it, so you mustn't try to see what it looks like inside," he said, for he knew that Skimpy was apt to open the heads of her dolls, who thus fell victims to her thirst for knowledge. Skimpy, who liked to put on grown-up airs, pretended to have only a luke-warm interest in the matter. Philipp shoved a doll and

a jig-saw puzzle into her arms and took her up to the twelfth storey. "Listen," he said to the watchman whom he met up there, "keep your eyes well peeled to-night. The fire-escape and the basement."

"Right you are, chief," said the man. He looked down on Philipp. The old detective did not know what he was to do with the child. He was on tenterhooks. His office—or rather, Richard Cromwell's office—was a wretched place, and Skimpy could hardly be expected to stay in it Acting on a sudden impulse, he opened the designers' studio, switched on the lights and had a look round. Bengtson had not come back yet, and the picture stood covered up on the easel. The air was thick with Lilian's perfume. "You can sit down here and play, or sleep," he said hurriedly. "I'll be back again soon. But don't go out of the room—do you hear?—whatever happens. Eric will be back again soon too. You can help him with his painting."

"Is Nina here as well?" asked Skimpy.

"No, she's gone away," replied Philipp. He waited for a moment while Skimpy settled herself on the couch with her doll, and then he went to the door. It flashed across his mind that Skimpy might be the last living thing he would see. Perhaps that night a bullet was waiting for him, somewhere in the basement in the fur repository or on the staircase. He hesitated for an instant,

hurried back to his office and opened the door. There stood the bottle, half-empty. He drank a few deep gulps, felt the warmth, the perspicacity, the determination surging up within him, and he laughed as Toughy came into his mind. 'He has to shave twice a day,' he thought scornfully. He put the bottle away, felt for his revolver, thrust a few extra cartridges into his breast-pocket and went out of the room. The clock in the central tower struck eight. It seemed to him that years had elapsed since closing-time.

He went back to the fur repository and unlocked it. The furs hung in rows, and the pipes, white with frost, zigzagged between them. Philipp took one of the furs down and wrapped it around him as he sat down in a corner and waited. Soon his fingers became stiff with cold and his toes ached. The time passed. Nothing happened.

XVII

"GIVE me the keys and then I'll come," said Lilian to Eric, and stretched out her hand across the table.

"It's not really allowed," he said hesitantly.

"Not really allowed, eh?" she said, laughing. "How are you going to get the picture finished if I don't come?"

"But you can come without having to take the keys."

"When? At nine?"

"Later than that. When I've finished arranging the whole of B 8, that'll take me——"

"All right. But tell me when. At eleven? I can wait, you know."

"Yes, you can, but I can't," said Eric, not altogether at his ease.

They were still sitting at Rivoldi's, for he now sat with Lilian at Rivoldi's on the threadbare plush-covered seat at the marble-topped table.

"Give me the keys, then, and I'll come at eleven and go straight to the studio."

"I don't like the idea of handing the keys over," said Eric, and hesitated as he continued to hold the small bunch of keys on the table-top.

"Don't do it then," said Lilian. "I object to all this fuss and talk and belly-aching when I join you in the store at night and have to be led by the hand."

"Well, there's the key to the lift at staircase five," said Eric and let go of the keys. They lay on the table-top. Lilian did not even look at them. "You know the way, don't you? Turn to the right by the hydrant on the twelfth storey and whistle. If I'm not there, unlock the studio and wait for me. You'll find some cigarettes in the drawer."

"Fine," said Lilian. "Don't work too hard. I'll be seeing you, baby." She took the keys and put them into her bag. "Now I must run."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"And how. I've found a hair-dresser where I can get fixed after seven. So I must run. Till eleven, then."

Eric watched her as she departed. He had never seen any other woman with so lovely a body as hers. Everybody in the place turned round to look at her. She was one of those girls who seem to be naked even in a mackintosh. When the door had closed behind her, he lit another cigarette. He sat on, with his coffee-cup in front of him. The waiter came along, wiped the table-top and started talking Italian. Eric did not feel inclined for it. Nor did he feel inclined to go back to the store and rearrange

the silk department. Nor did he feel inclined to finish his picture, and he did not care whether he won a prize or not. He pondered for a while, took out a pencil and began to scribble on the table-top. First a few measurements for the display of silks, and then some random jottings which he wiped off with his finger. He sat for a while longer, staring blankly in front of him, and at last he rose, paid and went.

On the stained table-top a blurred drawing still remained. Not a drawing of Lilian, but of Nina.

Meanwhile Lilian hurried along through 41st Street till she reached Eighth Avenue. There, among a row of automobiles parked in front of a hotel, stood a green car. Lilian got in. The chauffeur was a good-looking young fellow with black curly hair. "Step on the gas, kid, it's getting late," she said. They drove quickly down the avenue. "Is Bill already there?" she asked.

"They've been waiting since seven. Is there going to be a show-down?"

"Let her rip, sonny, and don't talk," said Lilian sharply. She lit a cigarette and put it into the chauffeur's mouth. He grinned his appreciation. The car scudded along and with screeching brakes dashed round a corner. "You'd better wait down here," said Lilian as she got out. The apartment-house where Bill had found accommodation for her exuded an atmosphere of

excessive respectability. Imitation oriental carpets in the front hall, a girl with eye-glasses at the reception-desk, a little Philippino at the lift. He winked as Lilian went up. "Cut it out, Pedro," she said snappishly.

In her apartment the wireless was on. "It's you, is it?" drawled Bill as she entered. As always, the room was full of smoke, and bottles, glasses and some ice stood on the table. The contents of one glass seemed to have been spilt over the brocade table-cover, and the liquor was trickling on to the floor in sticky drops. Lilian went straight through the room to her bedroom. "Hallo," was all she said. She took off her little green cap and a glance in the mirror showed her that she was pale beneath her make-up. 'I'm a flop at this game,' was the thought that flashed across her mind. Her nostrils were pinched with fear. Bill stretched himself and followed her into the bedroom.

"Have you pulled it off?" he asked. She took the keys out of her bag. "There you are," she said and put them down. Bill gave a chuckle. He did not take the keys immediately. She picked them up again and went back into the sitting-room. Big Paw was sprawling in the armchair with Maxime on his lap. She stood up quickly as Bill came in. She was blonde and pale and very young, with the figure of a ballet dancer. Lilian could see that Bill was dopey.

He had once told her in confidence that he always took cocaine before he started on a big job. His eyes glittered. They had brought another young fellow with them. He was wearing the uniform of a messenger-boy. He had the shoulders of a boxer, and they heaved under the green tunic.

Bill thrust his hand into his pocket and produced a small jewel-case. He flicked it open and planked it down in the centre of the table beneath the light so that Lilian could get a good view of what was inside. It was a large emerald brooch. "A swell bit of work, eh? The grinding lost us two carats, but nobody could swear to the stone now," he said smugly. Lilian made a grab at the trinket. It was her reward for double-crossing Eric.

"Here," she said, and laid a roughly drawn plan on the table. "And leave me out of this. Take Maxime—I'm through with you, and I don't mean maybe."

She put the keys back on the table, close to the plan and on the wet patch where the liquor had been spilt. Her hand looked oddly slender and small beside the men's beefy hands which grabbed at the keys.

"You're through with us, are you? But maybe we're not through with you, honeybunch," said Bill. Big Paw had one of his chivalrous spells. "Let her alone," he growled. "She's done her stuff snappily."

Lilian looked at them all as if she were awakening from a dream. The strange faces, the strange hands, the emerald. "You'd better get started," she said. "At nine that bozo is coming to fetch me."

Bill laughed again. He passed his hand over his sleek hair and made it still sleeker. "Have a good time," he said. "Thanks," replied Lilian absently. Bill came over to her and patted her on the shoulder. "If all goes well, you'll get something nice from me," he promised. Suddenly he bent over her and buried his red lips in hers. Maxime looked on with a scowl.

When they had gone, Lilian opened the two windows. Then she turned on the hot bath-water. She felt chilly. The bath braced her up a little. She went back into the sitting-room and searched among the half-empty bottles. Yes, they had absinthe as well. She quickly mixed herself a drink that had a sharp taste of kummel, and gulped it down. Immediately she felt the heat mounting in her and the reckless feeling that she knew so well took charge of her. She stood in front of the wall cupboard, fondled her new expensive frocks, and at last chose a heavy green silk frock that fitted her body like a glove. The telephone near her bed began to ring. It was five minutes to nine by her clock. "Mr. Cromwell is here," came the message from below. "Let him wait in the hall, I'm nearly ready," said Lilian.

She hated the young detective, and also regarded him as a buffoon. With a sudden resolve she took out her ermine cloak and laid it round her shoulders. She drank a second glass, felt herself becoming slightly tipsy, burst out laughing and fastened the brooch in her corsage. The telephone rang again. "I'm just coming," she said savagely. When Cromwell became restive, he was a figure of fun. She stood in front of the mirror, laughed heartily at the thought of what would be happening at the Central Stores while she was stepping out with Toughy.

"For crying out loud," said Cromwell, as she emerged from the lift. He gazed in bewilderment at her get-up, the ermine cloak, the long, white gloves. He himself had put on his best suit, the dark blue one that fitted him so remarkably well, as, in fact, suits fit nobody but former officers. "For crying out loud," he repeated. Lilian, who felt audacious as a result of all the absinthe that she had drunk, replied, "I suppose you've never heard that mannequins are the ritziest dames in New York."

XVIII

AT a quarter to eleven Eric left the silk department. His hands were grimy and he had a headache. Down below they had gone on working without him. He was rather chilly and he felt tired out.

'A department store at night is a cheerless sort of place,' he thought. He had to pass through the Japanese section which was in darkness. He took out his pocket-lamp. Here and there Buddhas seemed to leap from the darkness. His head brushed against the glass sets of bells that hung there in rows, sixty cents each.

In front of the lift he stood for quite a while and searched for his keys, until he remembered that he had let somebody borrow them. "Damn it," he said. The nine storeys to the studio loomed up before him as an endless climb which he would never accomplish.

With a groan he shuffled to the staircase, and with a groan he began to walk up. It was like a tough piece of mountaineering. He climbed and climbed; he was out of breath and had reached only the eighth storey. He waited, and presently he heard footsteps. This proved to be one of the

night-watchmen. "Do you mind taking me up to the studio and unlocking the door?" he said rather crestfallen. Suddenly it crossed his mind that he could not get into his own studio, as Lilian had the keys. The watchman muttered something; as a matter of fact he was always half asleep when he went on his rounds and he did not like being disturbed. But in the end he stretched a point, unlocked the lift and took Eric up to the twelfth storey.

"Our job's an unhealthy one," said Eric as they walked down the corridor, past the hydrant, to the studio.

"How's that?" asked the watchman.

"What I mean is, can you get any sleep during the day?" asked Eric in his turn.

"And how," said the watchman with a grin.

"You're lucky. I can't," said Eric. He took a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and slipped it into the breast-pocket of the watchman's uniform.

"It's open," said the man when he had put his key into the door of the studio.

"Is that so? Well, all the better," said Eric. "Thanks very much. Good night."

He hesitated a moment before entering. 'Lilian's already here,' he thought. He felt tired and dispirited and quite incapable of finishing the picture. 'To hell with the prize,' he thought. He felt as if he had not slept for

several weeks. Not slept since Nina had left him. He pulled himself together and opened the door.

Lilian was not in the studio, although in some queer way there seemed to be signs of life there. The first thing that Eric saw was a slip of paper fastened to the canvas with which he had covered up his work resting on the easel. He went quickly towards it, and read:

"Please let Skimpy spend the night here. If anything happens, take her to-morrow to her mother at St. Mary's Hospital. Thanks a lot.

"Philipp."

Eric looked round, and it took quite a while to discover the child. Skimpy had curled herself up at the far end of the couch before falling asleep. She had pulled Eric's great-coat over her, and close to the tip of her nose the flaxen wig of a doll peeped out. She was breathing steadily and there was something about the sleeping child which produced a soothing and comforting effect. 'If I sit down on the couch for only a second, I shall fall asleep too,' thought Eric. He looked round doubtfully, and at last sat down on a hard chair which stood in the corner. He waited, heavy-eyed. The clock in the tower struck eleven. He went on waiting. Lilian did not come. Eric picked up the telephone, and Joe answered.

"Hallo, Joe," he said. "Hasn't anyone asked for me? No message for me? Listen, Joe, I'm still waiting for one of our mannequins. Let her in when she comes. Send her up by staircase five. Has she a pass? Why, sure. Thanks. Good night."

Half-past eleven. 'Lilian's a nuisance,' thought Eric. His limbs ached and his eyelids drooped. He moved the canvas away and looked at the picture. No, he wouldn't do any painting. He could hear Skimpy breathing in her corner. Presently he lay down on the couch near her and heaved a deep sigh. He did not want to fall asleep, but he did so none the less.

XIX

"SOME visitors are coming on Wednesday evening. You see, I want you to meet my friends," Steve Thorpe had said to Nina after their evening out, which had proved such a failure. He did what many men in his position and age are apt to do. As he could not have Nina, he would at least flaunt her. He showed himself with her wherever he could. At the theatre, in restaurants. He had made her accept a few pretty frocks, and altogether he treated her as if she were a young queen in disguise. He may have cherished a secret hope that Lucy would see him somewhere in Nina's company. It was with the same idea at the back of his mind that he invited his friends. He was certain that one or other of them would tell his former wife that he had a lovely girl in his house and that he seemed to be happy.

It was now the second week that Nina had been living in Thorpe's house at White Plains. She had learnt to keep her counterpane in its place while she slept, so that it no longer slipped on to the floor. She had also learnt to hold her own in the butler's presence, and to keep Steve

company in the evenings. She often felt dazed, and altogether she lived in a sort of mist, in a place without air. She did not venture to ask when Steve would rent a room for her, as he had promised, and Steve on his part seemed too busy to think about it. For two days he had been trying to teach her the rudiments of bridge, and she listened blankly, without understanding a word. He also announced alarmingly that he intended to engage a teacher of singing for her. He was fond of music in a sloppily sentimental way, and always wanted Nina to sing songs for him in her tiny voice. Since the evening when he had made her drunk and she had been too outspoken, he had made no further attempt to approach her. Nina's conscience worried her. She was paid and gave nothing in return. In the Central Stores she had acquired the dreary idea that buying and selling formed the basis of life. Value and equivalent value; remuneration and service. She knew that she could not continue like that for long. Whichever way she looked at it, she was in a false and embarrassing position. It was for her to give Steve what he was entitled to expect. "It's nice of you not to rush me," she murmured faint-heartedly. As long as she continued to dream of Eric whether she was awake or asleep, she could scarcely be considered fit for what was needful.

On the Wednesday evening she was rather ill

at ease. Steve came home from his office a little earlier than usual, and at once disappeared into his dressing-room.

"What shall I put on?" Nina called to him beseechingly through the door.

"The dark red frock," was his answer.

For a moment she was surprised to find that he knew the colours of her frocks. She put on the dark red one. In the middle of it all she had to sit down. She felt dazed and her lips suddenly went cold.

Downstairs the butler could be heard bustling about as he laid the table, and a delicate hint of the fragrance of roast fowl arose from the kitchen. The thought of food gave Nina a slight feeling of nausea which she overcame with an effort. 'I don't want to have 'flu—that would be the last straw,' she thought to herself reproachfully. She went downstairs and looked into the dining-room. The butler who was not called James was standing at the sideboard and wiping glasses, during which process he breathed on each one and held it up to the light. When she saw this performance, a feeling of nausea again surged up within her. She took the glass out of his hand and put it on the table. After all, she knew more than he did about glasses and how tables should be arranged. "That will do, Trompsted," she said. She had managed to learn the butler's name.

"Would madam like Pommard or Rhine wine

with the chicken?" he asked inscrutably. Nina realized that he was laughing up his sleeve at her. She went on arranging the table. The cool, smooth feel of glass and china with which her fingers were so familiar had an encouraging effect on her. "I don't understand those things, you know that quite well, Trompsted," she said. The butler bowed. "Doctor Back is a vegetarian," he then remarked. "He doesn't care to have meat pressed upon him."

"What nationality are you, Trompsted?" asked Nina. "I quite like your accent."

"I am a Dane," he said, and with his tapering fingers he placed a receptacle containing cigarettes in front of each cover. He cocked his head on one side and surveyed his work.

"Oh, a Dane," said Nina. "I—I have some Danish friends. A Countess Bengtson."

She waited for some comment on this, but none came. "My own family was a very important one in Denmark," was the only remark that Trompsted vouchsafed, and he gazed dreamily at the flower bowl which Nina placed on the table.

"That will do, Trompsted," and the butler departed.

Steve arrived from upstairs. He rubbed his hands and smelt of toilet water. The dogs were frenziedly jumping up at him. "What is it, you little pests?" he said jovially and picked them both up. Max was a born clown, while Moritz

possessed a tragic bent, and was fond of Greta Garbo attitudes. The door-bell rang and the first visitors made their appearance.

Steve had invited five gentlemen, and it did not strike Nina as at all odd that there were no ladies. She had stage-fright, worse than when she had to go into the shop-window. There was a good deal of talk about this shop-window, for Steve kept harking back to it. He told each of his visitors separately how he had first seen Nina in the window, and how he had gone to the enquiry counter and explained that he wanted to buy her. He seemed to be rather proud of his conquest, or his purchase, or whatever the process might be called, as a result of which he had taken Nina out of the shop-window into his house and to his table.

The gentlemen, whose names Nina did not catch, treated her with an embarrassed kindliness. They divided their admiration between Nina and the dachshunds. Dr. Back was a man with snow-white hair and blue eyes, who asserted that he had a young heart. As Steve treated Nina with the strictest courtesy, his visitors were rather reserved and not too tactless. Trompsted brought cocktails, and Nina had a friendly glance for him because he was a Dane. The wireless was on, everybody talked at the same time, they had loud voices and laughed a lot. All at once the library, in which they were sitting before dinner, moved

right away from Nina. It was a queer feeling, as if she were not there at all, and the sound of the voices reached her ear as an indistinct murmur. Tony, who was making himself useful at table, opened the doors which led to the dining-room. Dr. Back offered Nina his arm, and she was glad to be escorted by him through the hazes that floated round her.

But when Trompsted handed the fried lobster past her shoulder, she felt unwell. Plainly and unmistakably unwell. At first she thought it was the cocktail, but then she had to get up quickly and go to her room. Trompsted went on serving without moving an eyelid, and Steve gave an embarrassed laugh. "She can't stand tobacco smoke," he said. "She's so unspoiled—just a kid."

All five gentlemen began talking at once to tide over the awkward situation. When Nina showed no signs of coming back, Steve Thorpe whispered something into the servant's ear. The man went away, came back and then whispered something to Thorpe. "She's still feeling unwell," said Thorpe, who was now rather concerned.

"'Flu," said Green, who had once been his partner.

"Everyone has the 'flu, it's the hot weather," assented a third gentleman. Suddenly they were all talking about the 'flu, and whether there was

any truth in the report that strawberries were sprayed with arsenic and that it was dangerous to eat them.

When the coffee was served, Dr. Back laid his serviette on the table and went out. He caught the eye of his friend Steve, and Steve's eye signalled back his gratitude. Then they heard the doctor going up the stairs which led to the bedrooms.

Brandy was served in large glasses, and the gentlemen went back to the library, as it was called. This was a room which contained all manner of things, but no books. Four of the visitors settled down to a game of bridge, while Steve established himself with Green in front of the fireplace, and arranged a chess-board between them. But he did not begin to play, for he was preoccupied and uneasy. He was fond of Nina, but there was no denying that she had been a failure from the very start. When he went out to fetch some cigars for his visitors, he could not help feeling that, far from admiring him, they were enjoying a joke at his expense.

But that was not by any means the end of Steve Thorpe's trials that evening. No sooner had he arranged his chess-men and taken the first three moves, than Trompsted came into the library, bent down to his master and whispered something into his ear.

"Eh? What's that?" Trompsted, a picture

of decorum and discretion, repeated his whispered message. Thorpe gasped "Pardon me" and rushed out of the room. His departure was so abrupt that even the ponderings of the bridge-players were disturbed for a moment. Green, Thorpe's former partner, looking very disgruntled, sat in front of the chess-board on which the game had only just started.

"Where is she?" asked Thorpe as he reached the entrance-hall with his butler behind him. Trompsted jerked his chin with scant respect towards the front door.

"For the love of Mike, why do you leave her standing out there?" growled Thorpe.

"Mrs. Thorpe wouldn't come in, Mr. Thorpe," said the butler, rather huffily. Thorpe pushed him aside and made a dash towards the front door which was half-ajar.

Outside, beneath the lamp which hung at the entrance, stood Lucy. She looked wretched.

"Lucy, how thin you are," was Thorpe's first remark.

"Thanks, yes, I've lost twenty-two pounds," she replied, for in spite of all her troubles she did not forget to weigh herself every day.

"What can I do for you—I mean, won't you come in? I have a few visitors—you know them all—Green and Doctor Back, and—I'm sure glad to see you," stammered Thorpe at random.

"Well, I'd rather not, while you have visitors.

I must talk to you alone," said Lucy. She tugged nervously at the little veil which covered her forehead and eyes. She wore a bunch of artificial violets in her hat, in accordance with the dictates of fashion that spring, and it seemed to Thorpe that he had never seen anything more dismal than those violets.

"Come along in—they're playing bridge—nobody'll notice you," he said hastily, clutched her by the hand and drew her into the house. When they reached the entrance-hall, he wondered where he should take her. She was trembling from head to foot, and, by gosh, he was trembling too. The laughter of the bridge-players burbled from the library. Upstairs, near the bedroom, the muffled and monotonous voice of Dr. Back could be heard. It sounded almost as if he were praying. Steve suddenly went hot all over when he remembered that he had Nina in the house. He drew back the curtain in the doorway of the sitting-room, and quickly let it fall again. The disgruntled Green had seated himself before the fireplace there and was reading a magazine, with the wireless playing an accompaniment. In the dining-room Tony was tidying up, in the pantry Trompsted was bustling about with the glasses. Acting on a swift resolve, he drew Lucy into what was known as the ping-pong room. For the time being the dogs had their sleeping-quarters there. They jumped up

at Lucy, and they were so excited that their joyful barking sounded almost like a whimper. A little chit-chat about Max and Moritz enabled them to tide over the first few minutes. Thorpe made Lucy comfortable in a wicker chair, and pushed the lamp away from her a little. It made his heart ache to look at her, and he was surprised at his own feelings. Dozens and dozens of times he had tried to picture to himself what would happen if ever he met his wife again. He had imagined the possibility of all manner of scenes, from icy scorn to withering insult, from the cut direct to wilful murder. Now he stood before her, ashamed to look her in the face, and his heart ached.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asked, because her face looked so thin.

"Thanks, I'm on a diet," she answered, and he remembered that Lucy's diets had often driven him to the verge of madness. He asked her no more questions, but went into the pantry, poured out two glasses of brandy, rummaged in the refrigerator where he found the remains of the lobster. The cook resented his intrusion, but under her very eyes he helped himself to a plateful and carried the proceeds back to his wife. It was the caveman instinct—food for the woman first of all, and the rest would follow in due course. And, sure enough, Lucy drank the brandy with gusto and began to peck at the

lobster which she proceeded to eat behind her own back, so to speak. Her eyelids were red with weeping, and the way she had allowed the make-up from her lips to stray untidily beyond its bounds showed that she was greatly distressed. Steve lit a cigarette for her, drove the excited dogs back into their baskets, and then sat down beside Lucy. She was not trembling now.

"Won't you take off your hat?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she said hurriedly and pulled the veil over her eyes.

"You wanted to tell me something," he said. "You can speak to me as if I were your attorney and nothing else. I'm good at listening, and if you need any advice——"

"I don't need any advice," said Lucy and shook her head so emphatically that the woebegone violets in her hat quivered. "I know exactly what I have to do. Everything I did was wrong, and I must pay for it."

"Sometimes twice two will make five in worldly matters, and thank goodness it is so," said Thorpe. It was a remark which by reason of its urbane and broad-minded spirit rarely failed to produce a soothing effect upon his clients.

Lucy eyed him narrowly. "You've changed a lot, Steve," she said.

"I take that as a compliment," he replied.

She looked at him absently and did not seem to have heard his remark. "As I was on my way

here, I had the same idea, that you ought to help me. It's all very well for you to say I should tell you about it, but it's no easy matter, Steve." She suddenly gave a sob, as children do when they have been crying for a long time. It was out of keeping with her faded looks, but Thorpe was touched by it. During the last quarter of an hour he had forgotten Nina as completely as if she had never existed.

"I'm not marrying Peruggi," said Lucy. "I've thrown him out."

"I never thought much of him," said Thorpe politely. Suddenly the flood-gates gave way. His wife flung her arms on to the dusty ping-pong table and burst into a fit of weeping, continuous and unrestrained. Between tears and sobs her story came drifting along piecemeal, and often he could barely make out half of it.

"Not thought much—not much——" she sobbed, holding her face in her hands. "He's a crook—a criminal—— He let me keep him—he borrowed money—and do you know how he got rid of it? He stole my emerald ring, yes, he actually did that, I was always sure of it, but I said nothing. I held my tongue—how can a woman say such a thing to a man—you've stolen my ring—why, I never even admitted it to myself, although I was sure of it the whole time. His manners are bad, even if he does say it's Italian, there are common Italians and well-bred ones,

after all, he's a count and not an ice-cream seller. He picks his teeth after meals, and he's always using foul language—and, but I would have put up with all that—and he was always swanking to me about his high-and-mighty family—and borrowed money—and he promised me that we should be married at Verona—where Romeo and Juliet are buried—and it was all very romantic—till I found out—that he was spending my money on girls—I don't know how many he promised the same thing—about the cathedral at Verona—and then, of course, I came out with the truth—that he had stolen the ring—give me back my ring that you stole, I said to him—it's too good for the riff-raff that you're running around with. And then he behaved like a madman, like a brute beast—he tore my hair and scratched and hit me—there——"

And Lucy raised her tear-soaked face from the ping-pong table, tore off her hat and veil, and showed the scratches on her forehead and the bruises on her left cheek.

Thorpe was rather taken aback by this outburst. When he saw that somebody had struck his wife, his blood boiled, although he himself had often felt inclined to smack her. "Come along, have another brandy," he said gruffly and pushed his own glass towards her. She drank hurriedly, put her hat on again, dried her eyes, drew her veil down, and took a flapjack from her hand-bag to

put herself to rights. What Steve found most touching was that she tried to smile, by way of apology and with a touch of shyness.

"You ought to be glad that you found it out before you married him," he said, using the most hackneyed phrase from the professional stock upon which he drew for the solace of clients. Her smile took on a deeper meaning. "You men," she said, "you're all alike. You've brought a woman into the house too." A couple of tears, late-comers belonging to the main stream, flowed gently down alongside her lips, and Thorpe realized that these two were intended for him, and not for the handsome, faithless gigolo.

"That doesn't amount to anything. If it's of any interest to you, I can tell you the whole story," he said. She scouted the idea with a quick movement of her hand which he knew so well. "I've nothing to reproach you with," she said. "I have no more rights where you're concerned."

"It's not a question of rights," Thorpe heard himself say. He considered what he should do with Lucy now.

"What are your plans now?" he asked cautiously.

"I don't know—I really don't know, Steve," she said pensively. "It's all as if there had just been an earthquake—I'm at my wit's end—I suppose the steamer tickets can be returned, but I expect there'll be a loss on them."

"As a rule the shipping companies refund ninety per cent of the actual money paid," he said, quite the professional adviser.

"And I don't want to go back to my hotel—I'm scared that he may return."

"He won't hit you again, you can depend on that," said Steve fiercely.

"No—I'm scared that he—that he—may beg me to forgive him—I—you don't know him—he can be very charming when he wants to——"

"That's how he makes his living," said Thorpe.

"You're quite right—you couldn't have put it better—that's how he makes his living," said Lucy, clutching eagerly at his words. She looked round and began to smile as the two dogs, who so far had been lying in their baskets with a sanctimonious expression, jumped up at her. Their tails seemed to have a separate life of their own. "Why, you still know me—you haven't forgotten me," she said, caught hold of them both by the loose scruff of the neck, and lifted them on to her lap. The dun-coloured muzzles were thrust into her face, to kiss her. Thorpe stood in the corner and pondered. The bridge-players, Dr. Back, Nina.

"Would you like me to take you to another hotel, or do you want to leave New York?"

"No," she said with emphasis, and he was left wondering what this referred to.

"I—somebody seems to have told you that I

have a young woman in the visitor's room," he said. "Of course, you could spend the night in our bedroom, and in that case I'd sleep in the library."

"That's very kind of you," said Lucy. The dogs on her lap were yelping, the door opened and Dr. Back popped his white head in. "Pardon me," he said in startled tones and at once vanished again.

"Are you in love—with the young woman in the visitor's room?" asked Lucy, smiling.

"I tried for a while to imagine that I am," replied Thorpe, also smiling. "Give me the telephone number of your hotel—I'll call them up and say that your luggage is to be sent here."

"Thanks," said Lucy. He noticed that she was mechanically passing her finger over the surface of the ping-pong table. Yes, it was thick with dust. "The house needs a woman," he said in the doorway. She looked up quickly and began to laugh, with a new glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"As for the romantic business—there's no reason why we shouldn't go to Verona and get married there—all over again," he said. He meant it to sound like a joke, but there was a catch in his voice. He closed the door behind him and bumped into Dr. Back. "What are you doing here? Eavesdropping?" he asked, and the repressed tension suddenly exploded.

"No, but I have something urgent to tell you. Your wife couldn't have turned up here at a more awkward moment." It occurred to Thorpe that there were no regulations as to when a wife might, or might not, return to her husband. "What's the matter?" he asked curtly.

"Just step with me into your bedroom—that seems to be the only place where I can talk to you undisturbed," whispered the doctor. Thorpe had intended in any case to go upstairs as he wanted to telephone.

"Now then, out with it. What's wrong with the girl? Is it 'flu?" he asked.

"There's nothing wrong with her. She's all right. Too much so, in fact," said Dr. Back, and closed the door behind them. This mysterious manner infuriated Thorpe. "Make it snappy, I want to telephone," he said.

"Well, my dear fellow, this is going to be an awkward business for you. It'll cost you quite a lot of money. But apart from that, let me congratulate you. It does you credit at your age."

Thorpe gazed at his friend silently for a few moments. The doctor returned his gaze with a mute portentousness. Suddenly Thorpe burst out laughing. "Why, that's grand—it's happened just at the right moment," he exclaimed. "So that's why she was all upset, the poor kid," he said feelingly. "Does she know what's the matter?"

"Of course, I told her," replied the doctor.

"Well, and how did she take it?"

"Women in that condition are apt to be a bit funny," said Dr. Back, although this was scarcely an answer.

Thorpe paced up and down the room twice, snapping his fingers. 'Rather a lot for one evening,' he thought. He admired himself a little for the flawless delicacy with which he treated women. "Listen," he said to the doctor. "First of all, call up the Saint Moritz Hotel and say that Mrs. Thorpe isn't returning there, and that she'll send for her suitcase with a few things she'll need to-night. Then go into the ping-pong room and keep Lucy there for the next half-hour. You can give her a sedative—bromide or a sleeping-powder, and then try to butt in on those bridge fiends and send them home. And this mix-up with the women—that's a professional secret, you understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Dr. Back, with an expression of complete bewilderment on his clean-shaven countenance.

Thorpe hurried through the two dressing-rooms which separated the visitor's room from his own sleeping-quarters, waited for a moment in front of Nina's door, and then knocked. "It's only me, Steve," he said. It flashed across his mind that it was years since so many exciting

and agreeable things had happened to him as in the past hour.

"Come in," shouted Nina, and he went in, with an embarrassed masculine smile on his flushed face.

But he discovered quite a different Nina from the one whom he had known. She had completely changed, she was all of a flutter, all worked up, and quite irresponsible. She laughed and cried and altogether behaved in a crazy manner. He did not know whether she was distressed or delighted, and probably she herself did not know, either.

There was only one thing she did know. She wanted to get away, there and then, to get away on the spot from the house where the servants despised her, and the visitors treated her with gross disrespect. She was going to have a child, she was a mother, she was going to have a baby, a new Eric, a Count Bengtson. She gave vent to all this as she packed her trunk—or rather she did not so much pack it as fling everything higgle-piggledy into it—the cheap underwear, the dolls, the revolver. Thorpe stood there, as if he were trying to cope with a flood. All that he could do was to throw in the new frocks that he had given her, and secretly to slip a banknote into her bag, so as to be on the safe side.

It all happened with such headlong speed that when Nina was shaking hands with him and

thanking him politely for having put her up, he realized that she was already elsewhere.

He delayed her a little at the door of the visitor's room, for he heard the bridge-players taking their leave downstairs, amid coughing and laughter and the aroma of expensive cigars. Dr. Back seemed to have done his job thoroughly. Thorpe stepped on to the landing to investigate. He did not want Lucy and Nina, both in such disarray, to meet. Privately he thanked heaven for Nina's sudden departure which spared him a good deal of unpleasantness.

He motioned to her to follow him, and sent Trompsted to fetch her luggage, for she now could not be allowed to carry any trunks, not even her small suitcase.

"Tony," he said to his chauffeur, who had made himself useful at table, "take Miss Nina to Fieldston, and then drive to the Saint Moritz Hotel and ask for Mrs. Thorpe's luggage. Say that I'll go there to-morrow and pay the bill. And I shan't need the car to-morrow before ten."

He whisked Nina into the car and they said a perfunctory good-bye to each other. She was already with Eric, and he was already with Lucy.

"Drive very carefully, Tony, please," was the last he heard her say. He stood in front of the house until the lights of the car vanished down the street in the darkness, and then he

shook his head. 'Taking it all round, women are strange creatures,' he thought to himself.

And this puzzlement marked the end of Nina's attempt to sell herself, and the beginning of Thorpe's second marriage.

XX

IT was half an hour after midnight. The night-watchmen had just finished their second round and were making themselves some coffee in their den. The night-bell rang in the cubby-hole where Joe, the door-keeper, was on duty. Two shapes loomed up outside.

"We want to go up to Mr. Bengtson."

"Have you a pass?" Joe enquired of the girl, who was young and pale and had the figure of a ballet dancer.

"Yes, sure."

The watchman took the pass and went back with it into his cubby-hole, closer to the light from the electric bulb. He had a glass eye, and had to hold the paper askew.

"And what about the boy?" he asked.

"Why, that's the boy who's bringing the things."

"What things?"

"The things for Mr. Bengtson, of course."

"Has he a pass?"

"I have one, haven't I?"

"Yes, but I can't let him in without a pass."

"But he must bring the things in. Mr.

Bengtson can't do his work without the things," said the girl.

"I can't help that," said Joe and turned the side of his face with the glass eye towards the boy in order to look at the girl. He was knocked down by a blow on the jaw.

"Right on the button," said the boy, very pleased with himself, and disappeared in the passage which led to the yard of the old premises. The girl went into the street. A car stopped at the corner. Two men got out and came over. The girl walked past the men, murmured something and walked on. She beckoned to a taxi and drove away. The men entered the Central Stores through the open door, which they shut behind them.

Joe was still lying on the floor, unconscious and smiling. Big Paw picked him up and carried him into his cubby-hole. While he was fastening him to the chair and plying him with chloroform, Bill produced the small plan which Lilian had drawn for him, and studied it under the light. "Call Kid in," he said to Big Paw. "Where's Bully?" asked Big Paw. He was agitated and could not keep calm. Bill gave him a slight push. He opened the door and peered into the street. A man, all by himself, was gazing raptly at the window in which the portable cocktail bars were displayed. Big Paw had to wait quite a while, and Bill was chafing behind him. The

clock in the central tower struck three-quarters. At last the belated window shopper dragged himself away and sauntered aimlessly down the street with the air of a man who is bored and hankers after adventure. Two cars came by, then for a moment the street was empty. Kid suddenly arrived on the scene and slipped through the door into the Central Stores. Joe was neatly tied up, with sticking-plaster over his mouth and well dosed with narcotic. They followed Bill silently through the yard; Big Paw was scared by a white cat that was rolling an empty tin-can over the cement paving. Through a glass door they could now see the half-lit department for men's ready-made clothing. Noiselessly Bill took out the keys which Lilian had given him and unlocked the door. There were only five keys in all, and he found the right one without any fumbling.

When they were inside, they stood stock-still for a minute or two and listened intently. There was dead silence. The wax figure of a blond gentleman in a linen suit stared at them with a vacant smile. Bully, the one in the uniform of a messenger-boy, lifted up the white sheeting with which the neck-ties were covered over. "Lay off that," snarled Bill. "All right, keep your shirt on," replied the boy. He found it difficult to drag himself away from the neck-ties. "Saps like you have gummed the works on the biggest jobs before now," said Bill.

He led them on, zigzagged amid the silent, eerie-looking sales department, till he reached the staircase which led into the basement.

"The two boys are coming with me. You stay up here and keep your eyes open."

"O.K., chief," said Big Paw in a loud voice. What had already frayed his nerves was that they were creeping about and whispering in an empty store where nobody could hear them.

"You know what to do. If anybody comes, show them your revolver. But don't make a row unless you have to."

"Sure, chief," said Big Paw once more.

"The fire-escape is on the third storey, right close to the lift," said Bill to all of them. "The car will wait at the south-west corner."

Big Paw watched them disappear in the entrance to the staircase. He took out a cigarette and began to smoke. He was scared, and Bill's bold front did not impress him. Bill took dope, and that made anyone venturesome and reckless. He himself had not drunk enough to feel at his best. He would have liked to stroll round the empty store and inspect everything, but he could not summon up enough courage. He threw away the half-smoked cigarette and straightway lit another. He tiptoed to the nearest moving staircase which, motionless as it was, had the same eerie appearance as everything else, and he squatted on the lowest step. He rested his head

in his arms, and then he heard a steady throbbing which roused his fears. "Gosh," he said, and laughed in astonishment when he discovered that it was only the beat of his pulse which he could hear through his sleeve. Then he sat quite still, and remained like that for a long time.

He was sure that he had not fallen asleep, at any rate, he had in the meanwhile heard the clock strike one, but it was nevertheless exactly like a sudden awakening when he heard voices from one of the upper storeys. "Good night," shouted someone from above. "Now scram, it's high time you hit the hay."

This was followed by the sound of laughter which made a hollow echo against the vast walls. Big Paw put his hand in his pocket and by force of habit gripped his revolver. He looked around, and in a panicky second discovered the best hiding-place. He pulled back the curtain behind which the cheap suits for men were hanging in rows, slipped in there, and drew the curtain back again. Meanwhile footsteps could be heard coming down the moving staircase, and when Big Paw peeped through a chink in the curtain, he saw an extremely blond young man rushing down the staircase, two steps at a time. 'He'll find the watchman and give the alarm,' thought Big Paw, although thinking was not his strong point. He took out his revolver and aimed it at the young man, but he bided his time. The young man

had now reached one of the big mirrors, planted himself in front of it and began to inspect his chin. He looked round, took the white hat from the head of the wax figure in the linen suit, put it on and inspected himself closely from all sides. He rummaged in his pocket, found a cigarette, put it into his mouth but did not light it, and again inspected himself. Big Paw in his hiding-place could not help grinning. After the young man had inspected himself sufficiently, he took off the hat, put the cigarette back into his pocket and bowed to the wax figure before replacing the hat. Then he took a flying start and scudded across the oil-cloth on the floor towards the exit.

Big Paw darted from his recess, and from behind shouted to the young man: "Hands up!" The young man turned round and gasped with amazement. He did not put his hands up. Probably he could not realize what it was all about. "Hands up!" repeated Big Paw in somewhat lower tones. He suddenly remembered that there seemed to be a number of people upstairs. Perhaps the store swarmed with people working at night. The young man now raised his hands like a marionette operated with two wires. Big Paw considered what he should do with him. But before he could reach a decision, the young man's straw-coloured hair was lifted as if a breeze had blown through it, his freckled face turned white, and he collapsed. It was the

first time that Big Paw had ever seen anyone faint, and he did not quite know what to do. He went across to the young man, raised him from the floor, and felt queasy as he came into contact with the limp body.

At this moment he heard something with which he was only too familiar. Shots. Three muffled shots from the basement, three thuds in quick succession. He let go of the young man, glanced round desperately, and in the next moment was racing madly up the stairs to the third storey. He arrived breathless and looked about him for the lifts, next to which the fire-escape was supposed to be. He ran past three ladies in dressing-gowns, dashed round a corner and saw a man coming towards him. He knocked him over, as if he were playing football, and heard him drop with a bump. With the butt of his revolver he smashed the huge window-pane, and felt a gust of night air on his sweating face. From the fire-escape he looked down into the yard in which the cat had been playing. He decided not to budge. People were now rushing about down below, and suddenly all the burglar-alarms in the huge block of buildings began to rend the air. Pandemonium broke loose. He was so frightened that he started up with a jerk. Then someone hit him and he fell over.

XXI

THERE is something uncanny about the sound of a bell in an empty house. It was midnight, and at Bradleys' there was nobody at home. The front hall was empty, the furnished rooms were empty, Mrs. Bradley's bed empty, Eric's bed empty, Philipp's bed empty—not even Skimpy was at home, and nothing could be heard there but the ringing of the bell. First a long peal, then in brief jerks, then another long peal, first patiently, then restively, then in a sort of frenzied effort, and then there was silence.

"There's nobody at home," said Nina to the chauffeur who had carried her two trunks out of the car and was now waiting close at hand.

"Shall I drive madam back?" he asked and put the luggage into the car again.

"No, don't do that, on any account," exclaimed Nina.

"Where shall I drive, please?" asked Tony and started the car.

"Yes, where?" asked Nina, baffled.

"To a hotel, maybe?" the man suggested.

"Yes, but not an expensive one," said Nina in a dull voice.

Tony thereupon took her to a small hotel at the upper end of Broadway where they looked at her in an odd manner. But she had luggage, and they gave her a room that smelt of chemicals. She sat down on the edge of the bed and telephoned. She called up the Central Stores three times, and each time she was told: "They don't answer."

"But that can't be. Please try again," she said to the telephone girl in tones of entreaty. But it made no difference. 'Maybe they've been trying to kill rats,' thought Nina, making an effort to account for the queer smell in the room. From time to time she picked up the telephone again and asked to be put through to the Bradley home. But it was not until early the next morning that anyone answered. She heard Skimpy's childish treble.

"Hallo, Skimpy, this is Nina. Can I speak to your mother?"

"No, you can't."

"Has she already left? I have something important to tell her."

"My mother is in the hospital. But she's doing fine. They're going to let me visit her. this afternoon."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Nina, but she had no time to express sympathy. "Can I—I'd like to speak to Mr. Bengtson," she added.

"Mr. Bengtson has been arrested."

"What's that? You must speak a little louder, Skimpy."

"Mr. Bengtson has been arrested," Skimpy yelled into the telephone.

"But that's—how do you mean? That can't be so," stammered Nina and felt suddenly chilled. Her lips went all numb in a most queer manner and her scalp seemed to shrink, but she clung to the telephone.

"He's been stealing things. He broke into the store. There was a lot of shooting. He's a gangster. I was there as well," announced Skimpy importantly.

"I'd like—to speak—to Philipp," Nina whispered into the telephone. The smell of chemicals became overwhelming.

"Philipp's with the police. His picture's in the paper too," said Skimpy. She waited a little, but as Nina made no further reply, she hung up the telephone, climbed down from the chair which she needed for the purpose of telephoning and, fully aware of her importance, started off for school.

Nina now entered upon a lapse of time of which she afterwards could recall very little. Her conversation with Skimpy had taken place at eight o'clock in the morning, and at ten she was sitting in a motor-bus on her way to the Central Stores. What happened to her in the interim she never remembered subsequently. In spite of

this, she was surprisingly clear-headed when she travelled up the moving staircase at the Central Stores. In the street she had bought a newspaper, and although there was no mention of Lilian's name in it, she felt absolutely sure of one thing: Lilian had got her husband into prison, and Lilian would have to get him out again.

Nina had been quiet and gentle all her life. But now things had happened which had brought about a complete change in her girlish nature. Ever since she had been taken out of the china department and placed into the shop-window, she had quite lost her peace of mind. She had been rushing onwards like a projectile that cannot be stopped once it has been speeded on its course, a hot-headed little comet, ready to burst into a million pieces. Outwardly this glowing young creature, the embodiment of a woman's destiny, did not differ from the other customers. Just like all the others, she glanced at herself in the mirror alongside which she passed, and she also paused for a moment in front of the sensational new beach pyjamas in the ready-made dress department. On that particular morning the place was packed. A sale of specially reduced lines was in progress, and the counters were besieged by women frantically anxious to snap up the best bargains. The early summer's day had suddenly set in hot, and there was a whirr of electric fans. The saleswomen were sweltering,

the manageress highly strung, and the customers out of their wits.

"I should like some attention, miss," Nina said casually to Lilian, who had just emerged from the work-room of the fashion department. Lilian was made up more heavily than usual that morning because she knew that she was paler than usual. The coating of scarlet which she had added to her mouth stood out against her white skin, and her feverish unrest found an outlet in the quivering of her nostrils.

Her gang had been arrested. Bill was dead, the smaller fry were nabbed. She had no furs, no boy-friend, no money, no career on Broadway. She would be lucky if they all kept mum and did not drag her into the affair.

"I should like some attention, miss," repeated Nina sharply. Lilian came to a standstill with that slight twist of the hips on account of which she had been duly removed from among the girl apprentices and put into the fashion salon.

'Why, there's Nina,' she thought. 'Maybe she's heard some news.' It was only just a passing notion.

Without turning a hair she would have poisoned Eric Bengtson if, by so doing, she could have silenced him and saved herself. But that whipper-snapper, that milk-sop had been nabbed, and there was every chance that he would drag her in too. If they put him through the third

degree, he would blab about the keys, and then it would be all up with Lilian Smith, who had risen from the darkness below and now felt herself slipping back, beyond hope of reprieve, into darkness and disgrace.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, and looked at Nina as if she were a postman who had brought a telegram late at night.

"I should like to try on this frock," said Nina and pointed vaguely over her shoulder towards the sliding glass door of the show-case in the wall.

"Step this way, please," said Lilian, took a frock at random and opened the door of the trying-on cubicle.

"Is there any news?" she asked, the instant that they were alone in the mirrored enclosure.

"What have you done with my husband?" asked Nina. There was something about this question which nettled Lilian unduly. She was exasperated by the dull respectability of "my husband," she was exasperated by everything about Nina, the quiet, gentle little girl from the backwoods who had found her way into the shop-window.

"What's your husband to do with me? Your husband!"

"You got him into prison. You must get him out again," said Nina. These were the sentences on which she had been brooding for hours and hours.

"You'd better be careful what you say, baby. Your husband's mixed up with burglars. I'm not," said Lilian. They were still speaking in undertones, their faces close together, and reflected by six mirrors. But even if they had spoken out loud, nobody would have heard them, for the fashion department was filled with the bustle and flurry of women. Outside the *directrice* was flitting to and fro, and giving orders in her French accent. All the trying-on cubicles were occupied. A saleswoman opened the door, said, "Pardon me," and closed it again. Lilian and Nina were standing close together, they were both trembling, and they spoke their minds to each other.

Lilian was hard-boiled, and she was in a desperate plight. But Nina was no longer the simple-minded girl that she once had been. She would stand no nonsense.

"Listen, I won't stand any nonsense," she herself said in so many words. And what she demanded, and kept demanding louder and louder, was nothing more and nothing less than that Lilian should give herself up and prove Eric's innocence.

Lilian merely laughed at the suggestion. She stood with her arms akimbo and just laughed Nina to scorn.

Suddenly she saw that Nina was covering her with a revolver. It was a large old Service revolver, and she was holding it clumsily.

"If you don't get my husband out, I'll shoot you dead," she declared in a deep, hoarse voice, a voice that was not her own.

Lilian clutched at the wrist of the hand that was holding the revolver, and turned it away from her.

"Have you gone crazy?" she burst forth.

"I have a child! I'm going to have a child! I must have my husband," Nina shouted.

The moment which followed was a memorable one. It lasted only a second, no longer than the flicker of an eyelid, but in that brief second Lilian relented. A child—that was a word with associations of quite a different kind. Nina was going to have a child—once they had been friends together, as girl apprentices they had sat side by side in the class where the store trained its saleswomen.

The fact that Nina had a revolver and was ready to use it conveyed to Lilian an idea which she could understand, an idea which was not strange and hostile to her code.

"A child?" she asked, and all unawares she let go of Nina's wrist. But in the next moment she hardened her heart again.

"What do I care about your child? What do I care about your husband? And the Lord only knows whose brat it is." She did not speak loud, but the words went home.

Nina closed her eyes and pressed the trigger. She had never fired a revolver, and she was

startled by the way it kicked. Then there was a slight smell of gunpowder. She opened her eyes Lilian was still standing there, with both hands resting on the small table. The tray containing the pins dropped on the floor, and then Lilian fell down too. She looked as if she were smiling in a scornful and rather astonished way, but perhaps she was in pain.

All this happened very noiselessly. The cubicles were thickly carpeted and the shot was no louder than the pop of a champagne cork. Lilian did not make a sound as she fell. Nina put the revolver into her own hand-bag. She left the cubicle. Outside the frenzied bargain sale was in full swing.

"Has madam been served to her satisfaction?" asked Madame Chalon.

"Yes, thanks," she replied.

Doors, doors, doors, stairs, stairs. To the lift —to the main building—exit on the right, glass doors, revolving doors, arrows, to the exit, to the exit, to the exit.

Nina went through the last of the swinging doors. Outside it was June, outside there were women with flowers for sale. Nobody followed her. She took deep breaths of air, her hands were quite steady. She summoned a taxi. "Grand Central Station," she said. She had money, her bag was full of notes left over from Thorpe's last present.

Cars, crowds of people, coloured porters, enquiry bureau, ticket office, crowds of people, porters, tickets for all stations as far as Cleveland this way, tickets for all stations as far as Boston and Newhaven this way.

"Lansdale, Connecticut," said Nina.

"Single or return?" asked the booking-clerk.

"I don't know," said Nina.

XXII

"SORRY to have kept you waiting," said Philipp as he entered his office at ten minutes past ten, "full up with work to-day, as you can imagine—the police—and then Mr. Crosby had a long conference with me."

He was enormously cheerful, as he had made up for his lack of sleep by taking a swill at the bottle, and his arm was in a sling.

"Are you seriously hurt?" asked the young man who had stood up as he entered.

"I'm used to that sort of thing. That bullet last night was the sixth I've had in my carcase since I've been working at the Central Stores," said Philipp, a trifle too grandly. He was as primed and full of go as a big, brand-new, red air-balloon. The young man scribbled a few notes on a pad which he was holding in readiness.

"I'm Sanders of the *Evening Star*, you know," he said. "We didn't expect that you'd have much leisure to-day, so the boss sent me straight along with a contract for you."

"Aha," said Philipp and perused the document. "Two thousand dollars for a special article. I hope your boss won't be disappointed. I mustn't

tell all I know—the police have taken the matter in hand."

"Don't you worry—I'll make them spill everything we want to know," said Sanders affably. "First of all, Pratt's going to take a few pictures of you. We've photographed the fur repository and the fire-escape where you shot the guy—how did you manage it, all by yourself?"

"Instinct," said old man Philipp. "Instinct, that's all. A detective must have the proper instinct, and then he won't be such a sap as to step out with a dame on the very evening when a gang breaks into the fur store."

After he had let fly this barbed arrow at Richard Cromwell, who had already lost his job, Philipp went to a cupboard and poured himself out a glass of neat whisky. "My novocain," he said waggishly. Meanwhile Pratt had arrived with camera, plates and flash-light, and began to arrange his paraphernalia in the poky office. "We'll also want a picture of you waiting in the fur store for those guys," he said and tugged at the detective until he was in the right posture. "That's the fourteenth picture that's been made of me to-day," said Philipp and edged his bandaged arm into focus. The flash-light shed a swift gleam. "Did you notice how cold it is down there?" asked Philipp. "Never higher than twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. You try sitting for four hours down there waiting for

burglars—take it from me, two thousand dollars isn't too much for a job like that."

"Get a move on," said Sanders to Pratt. "Tell them in the office that I'll be there in an hour with my stuff."

The cameraman noisily withdrew. Philipp placed a glass in front of the journalist.

"Now then, let's get it all down in proper order. We can skip everything that's in the morning edition. What about your arm?"

"The guy aimed at my right elbow, and not a bad idea, either. But luckily for me, I'm left-handed."

"Are they going to pay you the thousand dollars reward in cash that was offered for the capture of Big Bill?"

"The chief of police promised me I should get it, at any rate. You know, it's a funny thing, yesterday I was all down in the mouth. To-day I'm having money showered on me. Mr. Crosby shook hands with me and called me a hero. He's given me a raise and a job for the rest of my life too. And the chief of police stood up when he was talking to me."

"What are you going to do with all that money, Mr. Philipp?" asked Sanders, rapidly taking notes in shorthand.

"Ah, that's the problem. You see, I'm all on my own. I can't even spend it on booze, or Mr. Crosby would fire me."

Sanders laughed dutifully at this wisecrack, which was just the thing for the newspaper. "Have you any definite idea how many of the gang managed to escape?"

"Krocinsky—that's the one they call Big Paw—is in hospital, and Big Bill is already neatly packed away in ice in the morgue. Two made their getaway, but I've a hunch that's not nearly the whole of the gang."

"Don't you think they'll put you on the spot? Aren't you in any danger?"

"That gives me a good idea how to spend my money. I'll hire a body-guard, with Toughy in charge of it," said Philipp gleefully. This wisecrack, too, was taken down with gratification in shorthand.

"What's your opinion about this fellow Eric Bengtson, who's been arrested for being in league with the burglars?"

Philipp took another drink and reflected. "This is where I have to watch my step. That's for the police to decide. My job is to see that nothing gets stolen from the Central Stores. Everything else is a matter for the police."

"But you must have an opinion of your own," said Sanders and also took a drink, so as to produce an atmosphere of good fellowship. "I mean, what do you think of the guy—between ourselves?"

"Between ourselves, I've always regarded him

as a smart-aleck and a dog-gone foreigner who you couldn't rely on, and a big sap in the bargain —between ourselves. And if you want some inside dope, I can tell you that Big Bill got into the Central Stores with Bengtson's bunch of keys —all of us there have a tag with our number on our keys, and the gang wasn't slick enough to take it off. But——"

"But?" asked Sanders and clutched eagerly at the tiny word.

"But—nothing," said old man Philipp and lapsed into stubborn silence.

"Anyhow, I can say you're absolutely certain that Eric Bengtson is the chief culprit," said Sanders.

Philipp rashly swallowed the bait together with the hook. "We're not talking about that," he rapped out. "I'd take darned good care not to say anything of that sort."

"Is it a fact that this fellow Bengtson was sleeping in his studio when the alarm was given?"

"Well, that's just what we can't properly figure out. If he stayed asleep all the time the alarm was on, it looks as if he wasn't worrying any. But if he was only shamming sleep, then it's very suspicious, very."

Sanders waited with his fountain-pen poised in the air.

"Of course, Skimpy swears that he was asleep. When she got scared by the noise of the shooting

and the burglar-alarms going off, she punched at him till he woke up."

"We're publishing a picture of the young lady in the evening edition."

"I don't mind telling you," Philipp went on, "that last night they put the young fellow through a third-degree cross-examination. And you know what that means."

Sanders nodded with a look of awe. Sometimes people who had been through the third degree referred to it later, much in the same way as people who had been gassed referred to the war.

"The young fellow never opened his mouth. Never opened his mouth. That takes a bit of doing, you know. I always looked on him as a spineless, windy sort of bozo, but if anyone can go through the third degree without squealing—why, I've got to hand it to him. I saw him again at nine this morning. They wouldn't let him sleep, you know, and he was nearly blind from the dazzling light they'd been jerking into his eyes. The chief of police thought *I* might be able to get something out of him. But he won't talk. Anyhow, he doesn't try to prove that he's innocent. Do you know what he said? 'I've been a sap, and it serves me right.' I didn't think the guy had it in him."

Sanders stood up, fetched the bottle of whisky, and poured out another glass for each of them.

Philipp sampled it. "I ought to tell you," he then added, "that what he said about being a sap refers to his private affairs." His arm now began to feel very painful. He had been in a sort of trance ever since one o'clock that morning. He picked up the glass once more and emptied it. Sanders filled it up again immediately.

"Well, then, I can say that you don't regard Bengtson as guilty?" he queried, brandishing his pen.

"That's not what I said," mumbled Philipp, whom gentler hazes were beginning to enwrap. "But listen here, can you keep your mouth shut if I give you the lowdown? Mind you, this isn't for the newspaper. It's more than that, it's a tip-off, the same as at the races. I could prove to you that old man Philipp knows more than all the police outfit, with the chief and the whole caboodle, third degree as well. I'm not certain yet if Bengtson's innocent. But I know who's guilty."

"Who?" exclaimed the journalist, greatly excited.

"Sh-sh," was Philipp's reply. "I haven't said a thing. But I'll just show you what smart detective work is. There's a tag on each bunch of keys, that's so, isn't it? Now get a load of this. The tag on the bunch of keys that they found on Big Bill smelt of scent. What do you say to that?"

Sanders said nothing whatever. The pad in his hand wobbled, for he was hot on the trail.

"The keys must have been lying in a woman's hand-bag, for the tag to get chock-full of scent like that. Now let me tell you something. I know the girl who uses that particular scent. She's one of our saleswomen, and if they don't make Big Paw spill the beans, I shall have to go and tell the police."

When Philipp had said this, he lolled back in his chair and propped his feet on the table. His arm ached like hell, but he hadn't been so happy for years and years. Sanders was letting his pen race at full tilt over the pad.

"Have they arrested the girl?" he asked, without looking up.

"Say, listen here—you'd never make a detective. As long as the girl keeps on coming to the Central Stores, and I can watch her movements, everything's O.K. Once she's nabbed, she'll start telling a whole lot of lies, and we won't discover a thing. As long as she's free to go where she likes, we only have to trail her, and we can locate the hide-out where the rest of the gang are. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

Sanders went on writing and murmured that it made complete sense to him. Suddenly Philipp took his feet off the table and sat bolt upright in his chair. Then he relaxed and smiled apologetically. "I can still hear the noise of the

shooting," he said. "Whenever anyone slams a door, I think it's a gun going off."

"Maybe you're a bit feverish from that wound in your arm," suggested Sanders.

"I never get fever," replied Philipp with emphasis.

"To-day I'm only trying to get at the hot news, but you must bear in mind that we have to make this story run to ten instalments. To-morrow you'll have to tell me more about yourself, about when you were a kid, where you went to school and all the rest of it. A regular biography. 'The Man Who Gave Big Bill the Works.' You see what I mean? What did you say the girl looks like that you suspect?"

Philipp shook his head and laughed good-humouredly at this direct attack. "You can't bamboozle me as easy as that, no, *sir*. I hear nothing, I see nothing, I say nothing." He mimicked the attitude of the three monkeys from the temple at Nikko.

"That's a pity," said Sanders. "If I know anything about the boss, he'd be glad to cough up an extra five hundred for dope of that sort."

Philipp lapsed into profound meditation. The thought of Eric Bengtson haunted him. His inflamed eyes, half blinded, half dazed with the pains in his head, the weary droop of his shoulders, the sadness in his voice. He wasn't a bad young fellow. He had pluck. He could hold his

tongue and didn't mind taking the rap himself. And then there was the unfinished picture in the studio, with the blue-green waves and the orange-coloured sail, and Lilian Smith in the foreground. He was a sap, but nobody could deny that when he got into a jam he did it in style. "Eh? What's that you said?" he asked from the midst of his cogitations.

"Do you mind if I use your telephone? I just wanted to ask the boss if he'll give you a thousand bucks for telling the *Evening Star* who it is you suspect."

"Even as it is, I don't know what I'm to do with all the money," said Philipp. "Wait for a couple of days and we'll see. I'll make you another proposition. I'll take you with me through the Central Stores. You pick out a dozen girls and photograph them. Then I'll tell you whether the right one's among them. What do you say?"

Sanders thought hard. He saw vistas. As a newspaper stunt the proposition wasn't at all bad. Suppose they photographed a dozen pretty girls and let their readers guess which of them was Big Bill's sweetheart. Before he had thought it all out, the telephone whirred. Mechanically he picked it up and then handed it to Philipp. "It's for you," he said.

"What's that? Where? Dead? No, I'm coming," the detective shouted into the receiver

and then made a dash for the door. Sanders, being a go-ahead reporter, rushed after him as a matter of course, through the corridor, past the hydrant, as far as the lift.

"What's happened?" he shouted breathlessly.

"Big Bill's gang—they've tried to bump the girl off," the old detective shouted back, and they were whirled together down to the third storey.

XXIII

OLD man Philipp sat with two police commissioners in the white-tiled passage of the hospital. Sanders, the reporter, was sitting on the bench next to them. There was a smell of freshly polished oil-cloth, and Philipp's arm hurt him. They were all waiting until it would be possible to take a statement from Lilian Smith who was still very weak.

"What are they doing here?" asked the senior nurse, as she went past the four men.

"They're waiting to see Number Fourteen," said the nurse on duty, for each hospital patient was only a number.

Lilian had been an inert bundle from the moment when Madame Chalon had found her on the floor of the trying-on cubicle until she had been lifted on to the operating-table. For a second she had become aware of a dazzling, painful light, then she was given the anæsthetic, and she heard the ting-a-ling of the bell in the pawnshop. They dug the bullet out of her lung, they fastened her up again, and carted her back to room fourteen.

In the evening she came to. They gave her

an injection, slewed her round a bit, and then an attempt could be made to ask her a few questions. The nurse kept her hand on Lilian's pulse, and the men had to sit close by the bed, for Lilian could utter only the faintest of sounds.

Did she know the person who had shot at her?

Lilian pondered on this.

"No," she then said. She said, "No."

"Positively not?" asked the police commissioner.

"No."

"Was it a man?"

Lilian shook her head to and fro on the pillow.

"Then it was a woman?"

"Yes."

"What did she look like?"

"Like a customer," gasped Lilian.

"That's not a description. Say what she looked like."

Lilian, whose pulse, with the nurse's hand upon it, was beating feebly and slowly, whispered the description of a woman. Tall, dark and robust with a deep voice and a birth-mark on her cheek. A woman who did not resemble Nina in the slightest. The nurse made a sign to the commissioner: Enough.

Outside, in the whitewashed passage of the hospital, Philipp said: "It's as clear as mud. She won't talk. It was one of her gang who did the shooting. They were afraid she'd squeal."

"Sure thing," said the commissioner. Sanders

jotted down some notes on his pad, and then they all went out to have a glass of beer together.

Philipp felt that he'd never be able to get any sleep again for the rest of his life. He had been on his feet for twenty-five hours, and there was something about the throbbing in his elbow which felt like blood-poisoning.

In room fourteen Lilian lay stock-still. Her mind was at rest. She had another injection and slept, came to, lost consciousness again, and when she opened her eyes once more it was broad daylight. She was not quite clear in her head, but she felt that she had done the right thing. Her strength was still strong in her, the good in the midst of the bad, the will-power.

Nina had shot her. Lilian could not help smiling when she thought of it. 'Crazy little bitch,' she thought. 'Who would have believed it of Nina?' The idea aroused a touch of respect, an odd sense of kinship, a queer feeling almost of attachment.

"Well, how are you to-day?" asked the nurse and propped Lilian up higher, for Lilian kept sinking lower and lower in the bed, and this was a bad sign.

"Fine, thanks," gasped Lilian.

She lay there quite contented. She felt no pain. Nothing could happen to her where she was. Nobody had come to arrest her.

The electric fan—there was an electric fan

beneath the window—made a droning noise. Outside, a spray of ivy moved to and fro in the wind. Somewhere the faint sound of a wireless set could be heard.

Then she heard the bell which was rung at closing-time in the Central Stores.

A man stood in the passage. "My name is Sanders," he said. "I'm from the *Evening Star*. I'd like to have a picture of Miss Smith for my paper. Here's my cameraman, Pratt—step this way, Pratt."

"Nobody can see Miss Smith," said the nurse. "She's not doing so well."

"On the danger-list?" asked Sanders, alarmed at the prospect of missing a first-rate scoop.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders and glided away on noiseless indiarubber soles. "I'll come back," said Sanders.

But it was three weeks before he could see Lilian—two days after the funeral of old man Philipp. "Here's that shark from the *Evening Star* again," said the nurse.

"Show him in—wait a bit—give me the mirror—and my hand-bag—tell him to wait for five minutes," said Lilian hurriedly. The nurse flounced out in a huff.

When Sanders entered, Lilian was adroitly rigged up, pale, with dark-red lips and in a tea-rose-coloured night-dress.

"So here we are at last," said Sanders. "The

whole of New York is waiting to see your picture. You have a great future behind you and a successful past before you, baby. Take it from Sanders, who's seen plenty of stars get their first chance."

"I can take whatever's coming to me," smiled Lilian.

Sanders put a few finishing touches to her array, and Pratt came in noisily with his paraphernalia. "This is Pratt," said Sanders. "And this time, Pratt, we don't need any retouching. You let us do our stuff, baby, we'll fix your story good and proper. The boss offers you three hundred bucks for the inside dope about Big Bill —and that's only the start. What are you going to do when you get out of this hen-run?"

"My ambition has always been the stage," said Lilian instantly. Even beneath the white woollen counterpane, stamped with the name of the hospital, it could be seen what beautiful hips she had. "I should like to become rich and famous—my parents are poor and there are two others in the family, younger than myself."

Sanders, thrilled with delight, was taking it all down in shorthand. It was hot news for the *Evening Star*. "Baby," he said in solemn accents, "your career begins right now. In three years you'll have a brand of cigarettes named after you."

Pop went the flash-light and a thread of white smoke drifted up towards the white-lacquered ceiling of the sick-room.

XXIV

"WHO's next?" Mr. Crosby asked his secretary. The secretary looked at his schedule of appointments, and said, "Mrs. Bengtson, Mr. Crosby."

Mr. Crosby stood up and walked alongside the four huge windows of his office. All four presented the same view: blackish snow drifting past in serried streaks, which made New York look like a smudgy illustration in a newspaper. The two rivers and the hills were blotted out. On top of all this, the Middle West was making appeals for help because of the floods which had occurred there, as they did every year in March. Nevertheless, Mr. Crosby was in a good temper, for the shares of the Central Stores had risen half a point, and his sugar had fallen by ·3 per cent. "Tell them to send Mrs. Bengtson in," he said.

"Mrs. Bengtson can come in," said the secretary, speaking into the house-telephone.

In the front office sat three ladies, common or garden secretaries, whose job it was to receive messages from the inner sanctum. One of them now stood up and shouted into the waiting-room:

"Mrs. Bengtson." She had a voice like rancid mayonnaise. Nina stood up and went in.

She was still rather shaky about the knees, for Eric junior had weighed more than nine pounds, and had taken twenty-eight hours to arrive. But even apart from this, she would have had shaky knees when she entered the presence of the mighty. She wore her dark blue cloak, and the Countess had lent her a pair of white gloves that were rather too big.

"This is Mrs. Bengtson, Mr. Crosby," said the secretary and ushered her into an uncomfortable chair opposite the head of the Central Stores.

"Good day, Mrs. Bengtson," said Mr. Crosby, without looking at her. He was perusing a sheaf of papers which the secretary had placed before him. When he had finished, he gave a loud sigh, again took a stroll alongside the four snow-coated glass walls, and went back behind his vast desk.

"You have applied to be reinstated with us, Mrs. Bengtson," he said, and suddenly looked at Nina so hard that she could feel each one of the twelve freckles on her face.

"Yes, that's right, Mr. Crosby," she said eagerly and moved forward to the edge of her chair. "Mrs. Bradley told me that sixty more saleswomen are to be taken on at the Central Stores."

"Mrs. Bradley? Mrs. Bradley?" said Mr. Crosby, screwing up his eyes and scanning his papers.

"She hasn't worked at the Central Stores since old man Philipp left the money to Skimpy, but she lets rooms to people from the Central, and we hear all the news there."

Mr. Crosby cut short these bewildering explanations with a wave of his hand. "I have sent for you because my friend Thorpe wrote to me from Paris on your account," he said.

Nina went red.

"He seems to think quite a lot of you," added Mr. Crosby. The secretary's dutiful laugh caused Nina to realize that the great man had made a joke. She smiled wanly. She felt so nervous. How nice of dear old Steve not to forget her on his second and belated honeymoon, which assuredly could not have been an easy undertaking.

"Yes, Mr. Crosby," she said submissively.

"Thorpe writes to me in the same letter that I should also reinstate your husband. You yourself will realize that such a course is quite impossible," said Mr. Crosby.

"Yes, Mr. Crosby," murmured Nina with a parched throat.

"If it hadn't been for Philipp's bravery, the Central Stores would have lost hundreds of thousands through your husband's negligence. I say

'negligence,' as nothing of a graver character could be proved against him."

Nina stared at her gloves. "My husband has paid a heavy penalty for his mistakes," she said. "He has changed a great deal, too, since he was released after being remanded in custody."

Mr. Crosby coughed testily. He was not anxious to hear these psychological particulars.

"That will do," he said, and pushed the papers towards his secretary. "As a favour to my friend Thorpe, and also in view of the fact that your testimonials and personal record show that you are a reliable saleswoman, you will be reinstated in your former position. You can therefore report yourself immediately to the glass and china department—you will receive all further instructions there. Your husband must find a place for himself."

"He paints pictures. One day he'll be very famous," Nina could not refrain from saying. She would have choked if she had kept it back. Mr. Crosby looked disgruntled, but he screwed his eyes up, which was his way of smiling. "Who's next?" he asked his secretary.

"Madame Chalon—rise of salary," the young man replied. Nina saw that she had been disposed of. Her heart was full and she did not know how to express her feelings. "Thanks, Mr. Crosby," she said. "I'm so glad—you see, once anybody has worked at the Central Stores, why,

they'd do any mortal thing for the old place, even if they are always calling it names."

To her horror, she heard Mr. Crosby burst out into loud, croaking laughter, which presently merged into a harsh fit of coughing, the symptom of chronic bronchial catarrh.

Nina went past the three lady secretaries in the outer office, past the people who were sitting in the waiting-room, past the notices, "Quiet Please," and to the lift.

In the glass and china department they had already heard about it, for in the Central Stores such news items have a remarkable way of getting about, either by wireless or telepathy. Mr. Berg was genuinely pleased, and Miss Drivot at least pretended to be. "Have you heard that they're deducting fifty cents from every sixty dollars of our pay? That's the latest. An old-age provident fund, they call it. If you ask me, it's a lot of boloney," she informed Nina. Nina, deep in thought, was fingering the smooth, cool surface of a blue glass vase.

"Have you had lunch yet? No? Then hurry up, and you can start immediately afterwards," said Mr. Berg. "What's that? Can we find anything for you to do? I'll say we can. There's a clearance sale on. We have to get rid of all the English imported goods, sixty-two sets for twelve, to say nothing about the rest of the stuff."

"There's been quite a boom in glass and china

while you were away," said Miss Drivot, with the air of playing a trump card. A tinkling noise could be heard in the background—one of the new saleswomen had smashed a fruit-dish. "Holy Moses," said Mr. Berg and galloped to the scene of the mishap.

The Countess was waiting with her monstrosity of a Ford at the west wing, where there was a notice "Parking Not Allowed." She had entered into a conversation with a policeman, who was cheerfully giving her an account of his younger brother's complexes. Nina got in the car. "I've pulled it off, Mums," she said. The Countess proceeded to coax her engine, and after a time the car started. It slithered along in the snow-tracks which were now turning into slush.

"Where's Eric?" asked Nina.

"He's waiting for us at Rivoldi's. I'm going to stand you both a bottle of Chianti."

"I mustn't drink. I have to start work as soon as lunch is over."

"Are you glad?" asked the Countess, and the car began to zigzag dangerously because she was looking at Nina.

"Yes, if it wasn't for little Eric."

"Mrs. Bradley and Skimpy will look after him. And you can still feed him twice a day, morning and evening."

"Yes, so I can."

"And Eric is awfully clever at folding napkins and mixing bottles—you must admit that."

"Yes," said Nina, with a far-away smile.

"Eric's very, very fond of you, Nina," said the Countess. They could not make much headway on account of the snow and midday traffic. Nina did not answer.

"I wouldn't have believed that he could ever have come to this."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Nina.

"You know, Nina, there's one thing I've learnt out at Lansdale," said the Countess, as with a bold curve she swept round into Rivoldi's narrow parking-place. "Human beings are complicated machines. Complicated and faulty. It's all very well to dream about perfection. The perfect human being—the perfect marriage—the perfect character. The fact is that there are no such things. Faults are safety-valves—that's what I have learnt from those poor creatures out there in the mad-house."

Nina pondered on this for a while. In the meantime they got out, and the Countess had a noisy interview with the Italian in charge of the parking-place, until at last, mirthfully bowing and scraping, he let her have a parking ticket.

"I believe that if we're fond of anyone, we're just as fond of their faults as of everything else," said Nina presently, when they had already

opened the door and entered Rivoldi's smoke-laden premises. Eric was sitting in the corner, bent over the table-top on which he was sketching. When he caught sight of the two women, he hastily passed his thumb over his sketches. Nina sat down, and as she had gradually learnt to decipher his scribblings, she saw that this time they consisted of a sparrow family with open beaks. The Countess rubbed her hands together and gave the orders.

"Nina will keep things going till you sell your first picture," she said to Eric.

"That won't take long," said Eric and groped for Nina's hand under the table. She still had the big gloves on, and in bewilderment he began to pull at the empty finger-tips. While he was doing this, the Countess glanced at her meaningly. Men are weak creatures, we must help them as best we can—such was, more or less, the message which this glance conveyed. At Lansdale they had had long, thorough-going talks on this very subject.

The Chianti arrived with the soup and the canister of grated cheese. The waiter seemed to be in love with the Countess, and he had a tomato stain on his white apron.

"I'll try to paint what passed through my mind when they put me through the third degree," said Eric suddenly. It was the first time he had mentioned the matter.

"What did pass through your mind?" asked the Countess.

"Nina, and nothing else. The whole of the time. Nina—Nina—Nina."

For a moment they were all silent.

"Now see that you don't get into any more trouble—I can only ask for leave once a year," said the Countess and poured out the dark-red wine into their glasses.

XXV

LO and behold, at five minutes to six the woman once more shambled into the glass and china department—the woman who found everything too expensive for her. She trudged past the twelve counters which had been arranged for the clearance sale and came to a full stop in front of her rose-pattern china set.

Nina hurried forward to attend to her.

"Does this set of china still appeal to you, madam? It has been reduced. The price is now only nine dollars seventy-five."

The woman did some mental arithmetic, her lips moved. It was six o'clock, the bell began to ring. The woman's face lit up.

"I'll take it," she said.

"I must point out to you, madam, that two cups are slightly flawed," said Nina and brought the two cups together—there was a dull sound.

"That doesn't matter," said the woman, "things last longer when they're a bit damaged."

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